［黒の銃弾］

ブラック・ブレット

神を目指した者たち

神崎紫電

Illustration
鵜飼沙樹

里見蓮太郎

【さとみ れんたろう】

RENTARO SATOMI

勾田高校に通う二年生。天童木更が社長を務める「天童民間警備会社」の社員でもある。相棒であるイニシエーター・延珠とともに、人間の想像を超える寄生生物ガストレアへと立ち向かう。

藍原延珠【あいはら えんじゅ】

ENJU AIHARA

ガストレアウィルスを体内に宿す「呪われた子供たち」の一人。超人的な能力を秘める、ちょっとオマセな10歳。相棒の里見蓮太郎に恋人のようになついていて、巨乳の天童木更を恋敵として認識している。

天童木更【てんどう きさら】

KISARA TENDO

名門・天童家の娘だったが、ある事情で家を飛び出し、自活する元・お嬢様。
学生の身ながら「天童民間警備会社」を経営しているが、貧乏な生活を余儀なくされている。蓮太郎が恋焦がれる少女。

【てんどうきくのじょう】天童菊之丞

KIKUNOJYO TENDO

聖天子付補佐官。政治家としての最高権力者のポストにつく、天童木更の祖父。常に聖天子のそばにいて、周囲を威圧する。かつて天童家に居候していた里見蓮太郎とも、深い因縁をもつ。

聖天子【せいてんし】

SEITENSHI

ガストレア戦争により、五つのエリアに分割された日本。その一つ「東京エリア」の統治者。16歳。人間離れした美貌と優しい心、そして気高い志をもち、民衆から高い支持を得ている。

蛭子小比奈

【ひるこ こひな】

KOHINA HIRUKO

蛭子影胤の娘。延珠同様、「呪われた子供たち」の少女。父親以外の人間に対しては、常に好戦的な発言を繰り返す。腰に差した二本の小太刀を使う接近戦では無類の強さを誇る、延珠の好敵手。

蛭子影胤

【ひるこ かげたね】

KAGETANE HIRUKO

蓮太郎や延珠たちと敵対し、東京エリアの破滅を目論む謎の男。燕尾服、シルクハット、舞踏会用の仮面という、ふざけた衣装を身にまとうが、その戦闘能力は計り知れない。

伊熊将監【いくましょうげん】

SYOGEN IKUMA

三ヶ島ロイヤルガーダーに所属するプロモーター。巨大なバスタードソードを武器に、本能の赴くまま敵を潰していく高ランクのファイター。同じ目的をもつ蓮太郎たちを排除しようと、つっかかってくる。

千寿夏世【せんじゅかよ】

KAYO SENJU

伊熊将監とペアを組む、イニシエーター。延珠や小比奈と同じ「呪われた子供たち」だが、戦闘向きの能力はあまりない。その代わり、知能が飛びぬけて発達していて、相棒の伊熊将監をサポートする。

室戸菫【むろと すみれ】

SUMIRE MUROTO

しばしば蓮太郎に助言を授ける、新人類創造計画の元・最高責任者。ひきこもり＆マッドサイエンティスト。人並み外れた頭脳をもつが、蓮太郎をからかって楽しんでいる。

BLACK BULLET
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DESIGNED BY AFTERGROW

Prologue – The Defeat

At the corner of a cracked road, a boy was sitting with his arms wrapped around his knees, looking at the people who were passing by.

A narrow road that had become muddy because of rain was surprisingly full of people – some were walking by, others were sitting on the ground and shouting as if drunk.

Even while straining his eyes he couldn't see rationed goods being passed around, instead he saw aged people who survived their hunger by nibbling at the dug up tree roots. They had protruded eyes and unusually swollen throats. Judging from his own experience, the boy understood that the majority of those people who were eating nothing but tree bark, would die from a disease in the near future, but he couldn't face up to such a reality.

A man was walking around selling biscuits broken into small pieces at an exorbitant price; his pockets were bulging with ten thousand yen bills that were nothing but pieces of paper. However, it seemed this emaciated man was the one who wanted food the most.

Right behind him, near an improvised checkpoint, was a large crowd of people holding placards and screaming. It can't be seen from here, but there was no doubt that these placards had "Let us live!" written on them.

All of these people had left their household belongings and their homes and evacuated here, to Tokyo. But even Tokyo didn't have enough capacity to accommodate the refugees coming here from all over the country.

There was more than enough free space, but the tents were set up so close to each other as if they were huddling together. It was obvious that the most effective place to take cover from the wind and rain were the buildings, but one would be really brave to live in half-destroyed buildings and department stores that could collapse at any time.

The scene resembled the end of the world, and one might have thought such a thing would happen only in the movies, but that was exactly what this boy contemplated at the moment.

What all these people had in common were their deathly pale faces marked with despair and apprehension of an uncertain future.

A large number of people, who had refused to lead such miserable lives, had died in dignity long ago by taking their own lives.

No one would probably believe him if he told them that this place was once the suburbs of the capital.

All of a sudden, terrible languor assailed his body and his consciousness dimmed.

This boy was also uncertain of what to do from now on as he didn't have a place to return to.

Great numbers of people died every day and the war situation unilaterally became worse.

The corpses were piled up and burnt; although recently everyone became stingy over fuel, so the bodies were buried in mass graves.

There was not a single day without the smell of burning flesh and the odor of decomposing bodies.

This boy was certainly a lucky one. He appreciated the help in organizing the funeral, and though he was trying to concentrate on this only thought, the grief continued to weigh down on his heart for some time.

He closed his eyes and the first thing that came back to him was a ordinary but monotonous low voice.

The boy was sitting in the front row in a room resounding with sutra chanting voices, the singing of cicadas and the distant sound of wind bells.

In front of a monk, who was chanting the name of Buddha, two coffins were placed. Just past them were a great number of floral tributes and a little further there were the photographs of the deceased depicting their smiling faces.

The boy felt pain in his stomach as if it was twisted. He tightly clenched his fists and trembled all over. Though he was trying to endure the pain, the tears started dripping from the tip of his nose and soon his trousers were wet.

Just a week ago the area this boy lived in was invaded by "Gastrea" and had become the site of a fierce battle.

While the flames of missile jet engines and mortars colored the sky bright red, the father thrust his stubbornly resisting son onto the night train, leaving him in

the care of his friends in Tokyo. Right before the doors of the train closed, he said with a serious face, "Your mother and I will join you soon". They were turned into small charcoals.

A mass funeral.

Though he understood the meaning of those two mere words, he had been receiving an explanation of it for hours.

At first, unable to believe it, he had grabbed the charcoal that he had received. Since it was just a lump of charcoal, it crumbled in his hand with unbelievable ease, turning into small pieces and falling out of his hand.

The boy opened and closed his pitch black hand, trying to join together the explanation he was given and the reality, but without luck.

He just couldn't believe that several days ago these cinders were his mother and father. The cinders couldn't laugh or sleep by his side or make delicious meals.

When he came to his senses he grabbed the monk reading sutra, kicked the lid off the coffin and went berserk. He displayed an empty coffin to the people attending the funeral and screamed several times: "My parents are not dead!". He slammed through black-and-white striped curtains and ran outside. On the second day after he left the huge mansion of the man taking care of him, he drifted to a makeshift tent of the refugees.

However he didn't have a ration ticket and no one showed any mercy and gave him nothing to eat. There was no other choice but to chew tree roots and sip grass sap; that's why before long he got explosive diarrhea and food poisoning, becoming dehydrated.

Not long ago, he had started experiencing giddiness from standing up too fast and contraction of his visual field.

He wasn't able to stand up, so he just sat helplessly on the street with his back against the wall.

When he looked in front of him with his bleary eyes, the only thing he could see were a great number of legs. The legs of many thousands of loitering refugees were passing in front of his eyes.

Thin legs, walking legs, legs of children, men and women.

His mouth was absolutely empty and dried up. He stretched his hands and with all his might cried for help in a feeble voice, but no one stopped.

A tear flowed down his cheek.

He didn't want to go back to that house—— to the house of Tendo.

To his new parents and his many brothers and a sister whom he'd met just a week ago. He didn't have the self-confidence that he would be able to live side by side with them.

But it's all right. Strange, when he thought like that, the fear of death grew weaker.

Even the children understood that this was the end of this country.

Eighty percent of its territory was invaded by Gastrea – the land, the water, the air. The Self Defense Force had also suffered catastrophic losses. An incredible number of people were killed.

If he'd died right here, right now he wouldn't suffer much pain.

But—— The boy was scratching the ground with all his strength.

Even if there was the slightest chance he could survive here, he would devote the rest of his life to finding his parents. Those cinders couldn't be his parents. If he manages to stay alive, he would definitely search for them in every corner of the world.

Suddenly a prolonged rumbling roar echoed throughout the neighborhood. The people wandering through the streets stopped and tilted their heads. One man who quickly assessed the situation climbed up the church belfry and with a fierce look rang the bell.

The boy slowly lifted his gaze towards the sky and saw a large shadow flying over the mountain ridge. When everyone realized that it was a giant flying creature, the camp descended into madness.

Screaming, pushing and shoving each other, trampling down old women and children – everyone started running randomly, trying to be at least one more step away from this creature.

Stuck in a clouded state, the boy continued to stare at the sky with his arms wrapped around his knees. He was hungry and dehydrated, thus unable to take even one step.

Several seconds later something else flew over of the mountains, this time some kind of machine.

It was a support fighter of the Self Defense Force.

The pursuit fighter, causing intense jet sounds, and the giant creature trying to break away from it, as if in a dance, performed acrobatic maneuvers in the air. Ten years ago such a scene could only be seen on TV.

The fighter finally seized an opportunity and launched an air-to-air missile. A sparrow missile, its jet engine flaring, rammed into the side of the creature who was trying to evade, and caused a flame flower to bloom in the sky.

With one of its wings torn off, the giant creature let out a long scream in the air. Upon seeing this, the crowd stopped and raised a cheer.

But the next moment the cheers changed into screams.

"It's coming here!——"

The falling creature changed its trajectory, and the boy's field of vision started expanding.

The shout and roar became twice as loud as before, and one could hear nothing but the scream.

When the creature touched the surface of the ground, it shook with a violent tremor, and people in the crowd fell down one after another with screams. Like a plane trying to land on a runway, this mysterious creature adjusted its trajectory, but it couldn't easily counterbalance the impact produced by its weight. With a deafening sound it made a hard landing and started moving towards here, mowing down the buildings and makeshift tents in its way.

"I'll be smashed", thought the boy and tightly shut his eyes.

There was a choke-inducing earthly smell, and someone was heavily breathing, but it wasn't the boy.

Alive...

He slightly opened his eyes and right before him—— was the head of this flying creature, close enough to touch it.

"Gast...rea."

The boy murmured unknowingly.

About forty meters in length, it looked like a bird since it had reddish wings like those of a big ancient dragon. But it also had these deep red eyes, protruded out in half circles, sparkling like a crystal. They seemed similar to the compound eyes of a dragonfly.

It was a result of a double-factor cross between a bird and an insect.

A great amount of black blood was running down its sharp beak and a red light was visible inside its painful-looking swollen chest.

Thanks to him... no, because of him.

As if reacting to the boy's hatred, the Gastrea mustered all its strength and raised the upper part of its body. A long thread of blood dripped down to the ground. The monster opened its beak wide and gave a piercing scream right before the boy's eyes.

The blood mixed with drool sprayed all over his face. The wind from beast's stinky breath played with boy's hair. The monster's body shook and a scream started coming out from its throat.

"I'm done", thought the boy and curled up.

At that very moment he was pulled by his hand with a tremendous force, barely escaping the Gastrea's sharp beak.

"M-mister."

Though this man had reached an age of sixty, he had a sturdy physique and a towering stature.

He was the one who was taking care of this boy – the head of the Tendo family, Kikunojyo Tendo.

He came here looking for me? To such a place?

While the boy, a bit confused, was thinking whether it'd be a good idea to thank the man, the riot police finally arrived and surrounded the barely breathing Gastrea, aiming guns at it.

Without looking in the boy's direction, the person who saved his life announced:

"If you don't want to die, then live, Rentaro."

At a sign from the commanding officer, empty cartridges began to dance in midair and dry gun shots echoed in the sky.

In eleven months, the people of Japan conceded defeat. After that the "Monoliths", that provided autonomous defense, were built all over the country.

For the sake of Japan's survival, as a "temporary measure" the major world powers isolated the country, enclosing it with Monoliths.

More than half of Japan's territory was invaded, and a great number of people were dead and a dozen times more had gone missing.

And so, in 2021 Mankind was defeated by the Gastrea.

Ten years passed...

BLACK BULLET CHAPTER 01

第一章
天童民間警備会社

Chapter 01 - Tendo Civil Security Company

Part 1

The beginning of spring.

Under the evening sky colored purple red, a chief from the homicide department with a square-jawed face approached a face with strong features and began intimidating a feeble-looking boy.

"What?! You are that member of 'Civil Security' who rushed in our reception? Don't be ridiculous! You're just a kid!"

Being approached by a forceful face, the boy, Rentaro Satomi, averted his eyes that lacked ambition, moved his gaze up and looked vacantly at cawing crows returning to their nests.

Damn, he also wanted to go back home.

"I can just slip away from this detective," murmured Rentaro.

"Well, you can call me that. But I am that exact person who came to the reception. I also have a gun and a license. The head of our company told me to come here, so I had no choice. If you have some suspicions, then go away."

The detective clicked his tongue, narrowed his eyes, as if evaluating or something, and started circling around Rentaro.

"...This uniform, are you a student?"

Rentaro looked down on his clothes. His suit was completely black with an emblem of Magata High School embroidered on his chest.

"...Is something wrong with it?"

"Tch, recently even the kids play Civil Security... Show me your license."

Rentaro passed his license. When the detective compared the photograph attached to it with the boy's face, his body started shaking: "Aha-ha, what a tragic face you've got here! You aren't photogenic, are you?"

"It's part of your job, so keep calm," Rentaro said to himself, glaring at the detective.

"Tadashima," the detective introduced him briefly and threw back the license.

"'Tendo Civil Security Company', huh? Never heard of it."

"We are not very well-known. Hey, sorry for rushing, but why don't we get down to business?——"

Rentaro lifted his eyes and gazed at an old mansion standing right in front of him. It was a very ordinary six-storied building that attracted attention due to being damaged, eroded and full of cracks. Named 'Grand Tanaka'".

"The incident really happened in *that* place?"

"Yeah, that's right. The guy from room 102 called us, and while screaming told us that blood was leaking from the top floor. After putting together all the information we have, there's no doubt that it's Gastrea. Well, let's go right away. Huh, finally."

Tadashima emphasized "finally", saying it loud and clear, and entered the building.

Such strained relations between the police and Civil Security didn't start at that particular moment. But Rentaro was more amazed than angry at such rudeness. He stood still beside the building for a while, thinking if it would be better to go away, but then, having no choice, he followed the detective.

Soon after the defeat, a law had been established prohibiting entrance to a scene of an incident involving Gastrea without a member of a Civil Security Company, in short "Civil Security". It was a necessary measure to reduce the skyrocketing death rate of police officers, even slightly. But there was not a single police officer who kindly accepted the stepping in of the members of Civil Security, who received the new jurisdiction.

That moment Tadashima noticed something and quickly brought his tough face closer to the boy.

"Where's your 'Initiator' partner? Don't you have a rule that states that all members of Civil Security must fight in pairs?"

"I-I thought that I won't need her help this time!"

Though that question really startled him, he didn't say that he abandoned her.

"That wasn't right," he scratched his head and looked through the window of a dim lighted corridor to the street he came from.

The head of a one-man company informed him about the incident involving Gastrea that had happened nearby. He remembered how he raced here on his bicycle, realizing that if he didn't take this job, it would be passed to another company.

And that was the moment he deserted his partner. He hoped that she didn't get lost.

After getting up to the room 202, the crime scene, he saw a lot of police officers already positioned beside the door.

"Any changes?"

When they heard Tadashima's question, one of the officers turned around his pale face.

"S-sorry. A moment ago two point man abseiled down the roof and broke into the room through the window. We couldn't establish contact with them ever since."

The air froze.

"You morons! Why didn't you wait until the arrival of Civil Security?!"

"But we didn't want them to come here as if they own a place, rush in and take all the credit! I bet you clearly understand our feelings!"

"This doesn't matter! Furthermore——"

"——Get out of the way, idiots! I'm going in!"

Tadashima looked into Rentaro's eyes, jutted out his chin and gave an order. The two officers in full equipment, who were waiting behind, stationed themselves in front of the door and put the length-cut door breachers they were holding against the hinges.

Rentaro took out a gun – Springfield XD – from his belt. He pulled the slide, thus readying the pistol.

He took a deep breath and cleared his head. Then he wiped off the sweat on the palms of his hands with his pants and clicked his tongue.

The situation had become really troublesome.

"——Let's go."

Almost at the same time as the two shotguns emitted the flame, Rentaro kicked the door.

His eyes, now exposed to the dazzling light of the setting sun, immediately narrowed.

The small six-mat room was dyed by the evening sun as if emerging from the sunset glow.

But the floor of the living room was covered with something more red than the color of the setting sun. And there was that thick smell of blood that couldn't be hidden. The two police officers were dead, lying near the wall.

Then Rentaro saw something that he couldn't believe.

A tall man was standing still in the center of the room.

He was probably taller than 190cm, his arms and legs were really thin. It was quite a mysterious person, wearing strange garments – a wine red tailcoat with thin vertical stripes, a silk hat and an authentic masquerade mask.

This wasn't Gastrea. Who could this be...?

Soon the masked man turned his head and looked at the boy, a light smile appeared on his lips. He gave a piercing look at Rentaro.

"Oh, Civil Security. Seems like you are too late."

"What... You... Are you in the same line of business?"

"Well, I was certainly looking for Gastrea, which is a source of infection. But I am not like you. Because——"

The man spread his hands as if performing at a theater.

"——it was me, who killed these officers."

Rentaro's body reacted the moment he realized that the person standing in front of him was an enemy. Instantly moving closer to the man, he forcefully sent a punch as if scooping up. It was a decent blow with good angle and timing.

"Wow, not bad."

As soon as the masked man joyfully parried his hit, he stroke back. His punch sank in Rentaro's chest and sent him flying. He landed hard on his back on the glass table in the living room —— the boy could hardly breathe.

Who the hell is this man?

When one eye opened on the boy's face, twisted with pain, he saw the masked man raising his fist right in front of him. The boy tumbled off the glass table in a hurry, and it was shattered with a loud cracking sound. Rentaro jumped back and raised to his feet. However, as if predicting the place the boy would dodge to, the man made a spinning kick aiming at the temple.

Rentaro blocked this hit, but due to its power he was hurled back at the wall.

The masked man sniffed scornfully.

Though Rentaro was holding on bravely, he seemed overwhelmed by an incredible difference in their power.

At that moment an inappropriate ringtone echoed in the room. The masked man answered his phone.

"Kohina...? Ah, yes. OK, got it. Then I'll join you ther——"

"——Look here, monster! This is for our comrades!"

Several police officers were standing by the door with readied carbine rifles.

The masked man quickly drew a pistol from the holster on his belt and fired without looking in their direction.

The blood fountained from blue tactical vest and splattered over the wall.

The masked man fired repeatedly, and in the twinkling of an eye three more people were shot down, painting those standing behind them in red.

Rentaro walked firmly, closing the distance between him and the masked man.

Tendo combat skill number 18, type 2——

"*Inzen Kokutenfuu!*"

Almost at the same time as he said that, he performed a spin kick. The man dodged it just by moving his head, but Rentaro quickly shifted from one foot to another and unleashed a second blow, *Inzen Genmeika*.

A well-aimed high kick directly hit the man's mask.

As the boy started to give a victorious shout, the man placed his hands on his head, that was moving backward after the impact, and with all his strength shifted the head back to its place. Surprisingly, he didn't even let the phone drop out of his hand.

"No, it's nothing serious. It's just pretty crowded in here. I'll be there right away."

The man flipped the phone closed and stood still gazing fixedly on the boy.

Rentaro felt a chill as if the blood was freezing in his veins.

The man adjusted his mask, and let a laugh out of his throat.

"That was amazing! Though I was off guard, I didn't have the slightest thought that you would hit me. I really want to kill you right here, but I have some business to attend to."

Saying that, the eyes behind the mask looked at the boy sparklingly.

"By the way, what's your name?"

"...Rentaro Satomi."

Mumbling "Sa-to-mi, Satomi..." the man made his way to the veranda through the windows broken glass and set his foot on the railing.

"Let's meet again somewhere, Satomi... No, perhaps, *I* should meet you."

"Who... are you?"

"The person who destroys the world. No one can stop me."

The man jumped down from veranda in one bound.

The boy's stiff body didn't move for quite a while as if being sewed to the floor. Rentaro opened his sweaty palms and then clenched it firmly. *There are such strong people like that man in this world?*

Rentaro heard the moans, he turned around and saw the officers heavily injured by that man. Their colleagues fiercely called out for help and the wounded were carried out on the stretchers.

Rentaro's clenched fist trembled. At this moment someone put a hand on his shoulder and vigorously shook him.

"Come on! We've been prepared for such situations since we took up this job. What you have to do now is——"

Rentaro clicked his tongue and shook off Tadashima's hand.

"——I know! Prevention of the pandemic is our first priority."

Rentaro looked at the watch hanging on the wall, gathered his thoughts and braced up. It was a huge waste of time, but the job still wasn't finished. He banished the thoughts about this mysterious man from his mind. With the gun in his hand he carefully examined the unit bath and the insides of the four-and-a-half-mat room, after that he flung open the wall cupboard. Finally he opened the last big wooden closet, being sure that it must be there.

But—— there was nothing inside except for clothes.

"Hey, how could this be? Where is the Gastrea?"

Rentaro heard Tadashima's voice from behind. He became slightly confused, put his gun back to the holster and returned to the living room.

The problem was the blood on the floor, where the masked man stood earlier. It wasn't his blood. That man wasn't injured at all.

And besides, though he didn't want to think about it, the amount of blood on the floor might have been lethal.

Rentaro looked at the photograph on a low table. It depicted a loving couple and their daughter between them.

"The man was living alone in this room?"

"Yes, he was living separately from his wife and child."

Rentaro checked the ceiling.

"What is it...?"

Tadashima, who escaped Rentaro's sight, made a wry face of disgust. There was a green gel-type object clung to the ceiling. Rentaro jumped and touched a substance adhered there. He rubbed it with his fingers – it was extremely sticky.

"There was no doubt that the victim had been attacked right here. After that he probably fled outside through the window looking for help. And, I don't want to say that, but I'm afraid the person able to move while bleeding that hard is..."

Tadashima nervously slapped his pocket and took out a cigarette.

"So you are saying that the source of the infection as well as the infected person are still wandering about somewhere?"

Rentaro nodded.

"Inspector Tadashima, give an order to immediately evacuate everyone from the vicinity and seal off this area. They couldn't have been gone very far. We should also join the search team. You don't want to be demoted because of the pandemic spreading, right?"

He got a feeling of drifting between a half asleep and half awake state. But after coming to his senses, this pleasant floating feeling abruptly disappeared.

That moment he noticed that he was wandering about under the setting sun, he stopped walking.

He looked to the left and to the right. *Why was I walking here?*

This place was slightly separated from a living area, but looking at it from a familiar distance, there was no doubt that this place was somewhere in Tokyo Area. He couldn't say where he was exactly, but he vaguely remembered the surrounding scenery.

It is unlikely that I drank so much that I've lost consciousness, plus I am thinking clearly and haven't lost my sense of balance. But my body still has some traces of languor.

He lightly shook his head.

What is my name? Of course, it's Sumiaki Okajima. It has been my name for forty five years, so it's kind of hard to forget.

OK, that's good. Well then, what am I doing in such place? No matter how much I think about it, I can't figure it out.

I am not feeling like I was sleepwalking, and there's nothing but a residential area around here, but I don't think that some close friend is living nearby. So it's hard to believe that I came to be in such place.

Or maybe I took a stroll without any definite purpose and came here by inertia?

He repeated the word "inertia" in his head and unconsciously made a wry smile.

When the company he was working for went bankrupt, he had until this very moment been living in inertia. Being tired of his savings balance that kept decreasing, he thought that he could cover his losses by playing mahjong and poker. That was the beginning of all his mistakes. At the time when his delirium abated and he was able to realize his own stupidity, he had already lost an enormous sum of money.

After the war with Gastrea, Sumiaki contemptuously looked at those people who lost their purpose in life and were driven to slow suicide. But now Sumiaki was exactly like those people whom he despised in the past.

He couldn't blame his wife and daughter who soon left him.

Sumiaki, who drowned his despair in drinks, even out of politeness couldn't be called a good father. Right now he was barely holding an honest thought in his head – "What would he do when he no longer has any money to buy liquor".

His own house has been distrained, so he spent all days in a cramped mansion doing nothing. Being unable to be a part of the society, he was badly cast down, feeling meaningless and sometimes he wanted to scream.

Sumiaki bought a plastic bottle of some sports drink at a vending machine standing beside a telegraph pole. He took a sip but didn't even notice that it was very bland.

He drained the contents of the half-a-liter bottle in an instant and felt more dryness in his throat than before.

"...Really, what am I doing in such place?——"

"—— Ren–ta–ro is a heart–less per–son! ——"

Sumiaki was startled when he heard a loud yell. He saw a girl, casting a long shadow in front of herself, walking in his direction. She was probably ten years old, wearing a stylish coat with checkered lining and a miniskirt. She had lace-up shoes with thick soles, her slightly quivering twin-tails were combed with huge barrettes.

He felt hearing her somewhat disturbed voice, when she was passing by.

"That bastard. To abandon me, his 'fiancee'..."

Although it seemed that Sumiaki had gotten lost, the girl passed by without noticing his existence.

"Young lady, can you tell me the directions?"

Upon hearing the first words from a suspicious person, as he had expected, the girl, who raised her head, was startled and suddenly jumped back.

"W-wait, please, I'm not some strange person. My name is Sumiaki Okajima. I'm probably living somewhere near this place, but I can't remember the road back home."

The girl kept staring at him without blinking. While the man was thinking if he should say something else to clear up the misunderstanding, the girl gave a bewildered look, as if realizing something.

"Mister, do you understand what happened to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"There's nothing I can do about it. No one can. Uhm... Well, do you have any last words? To your friends, your family or maybe someone else?"

"...What on earth are you talking about?"

"Well, that's it and there's nothing else I can say to you, even if I wanted. But, Rentaro told me, 'It's your duty to convey the message to the aforementioned people', so I promise to pass them your words."

He was unable to comprehend this conversation. *Who is she and what does she mean?*

The girl, who was no higher than his chest, cast an upward pitying look.

"Seems that you haven't noticed it yet. In this case, it would be better to take a look at your figure. But you should look slowly so that you won't panic. If you do as I say, you'll understand what I am talking about."

Sumiaki was overawed by the atmosphere that settled after this girl's strange resignation. He looked at himself.

"What is this...?"

His abdomen was dyed deep red. No, not only the abdomen. A large wound, as if he was torn up, spread up to the tip of his shoulder and his throat; the fresh blood was still gushing from it. A pretty big puddle of blood had been forming on the asphalt road, where Sumiaki was standing.

Trembling with fear he touched his abdomen and felt some slimy disgusting substance.

Why haven't I noticed this before, and to begin with, why haven't I felt any pain? How did this happen to me?

The next moment his vision blacked out as if the world turned upside down, and Sumiaki fell down right where he was standing.

"I... remember. Yes, I became penniless and then..."

Sumiaki had been to countless job interviews, sometimes he received refusals that seemed like these people disowned his personality and he was assailed by unbearable chagrin.

After some time he received a job at a company that specialized in cleaning solar cell modules. The job was tough, but he had a guaranteed salary although it wasn't big. He was thinking that if his life stabilized, he could return to his wife and child.

At that moment it was just a dream and to achieve it he should've gotten back on his feet first. However, the moment he realized that he would be able to do such thing, Sumiaki's body was overcome with magma-like agitation.

"Just to hear her voice"—— With this thought he came out to the mansion veranda and called his wife.

While he was waiting for the recipient to answer the call, he suddenly looked upwards. Perhaps, it was the unluckiest moment in his life.

A big human-sized creature was clinging to the wall on the fourth floor of the mansion. This creature, that was waiting for Sumiaki to notice it, flashed its blood-colored vermilion eyes and fell on him.

"...I was about to be killed by that Gastrea, so I ran like hell from it and came here."

"This Gastrea left its body fluids in you."

Sumiaki looked at two fang marks on the tip of his shoulder.

"Yeah."

The voice of despair leaked out of his throat.

He remembered the TV broadcast that he had seen numerous times during the war. Laboratory rats, that were injected with Gastrea virus, became strangely-shaped a few minutes later and screamed like newborn babies, leaving the viewers speechless.

As the girl pointed out, his calves became itchy, his body temperature grew and he felt a pressure as if his insides were swelling out.

Perhaps even at that moment Sumiaki's DNA information was being changed at enormous speed.

If he'd noticed that, he would have burst in tears.

"Well, then you are from Civil Security...?"

"Aha, my name is Enju Aihara, I'm an 'Initiator'. I'm ten and I'm already a fine lady."

He intended to laugh, but instead his ill-formed face only twitched. It looked like he couldn't control his body anymore.

"...I've got a favor to ask. Can you apologize to my wife and daughter for me?——Tell them, that I am sorry for what I've done."

"...I will."

It was the last time Sumiaki was seeing this world.

Still retaining *human* shape, his body temperature exceeded critical point.

His arms and legs withered with unbelievable speed and the next moment long and narrow pitch-black legs appeared from his body as if breaking through it.

Along with eight long legs covered with hair, four pairs of vermillion compound eyes appeared at the place of his head. His abdomen swelled like a ball, two wet glittering fangs protruded from the corners of his mouth. The yellow and black spotted pattern of his body would certainly raise a visceral aversion in any human.—— This was a huge spider.

But the little girl neither ran away, nor screamed, – she just calmly got ready. Suddenly she heard a voice, coming from nowhere.

"Gastrea is confirmed—— model: spider, stage I. Engaging in battle!"

The girl turned towards the voice.

"Rentaro!"

"Enju, are you all right?!"

Enju started running. Rentaro also ran up to the girl with spread arms.

Under the slowly setting evening sun, these two people who became separated for but a little time, flooded with emotions, embraced each oth—— well, no, Enju just kicked Rentaro in his groin.

"Ghaaaaaa—"

Rentaro fell on his knees holding his groin with both hands and touched the ground with his forehead. Writhing on the ground in great agony, totally unknown to women, Rentaro lifted his head, clenching his teeth.

Enju Aihara, a girl of 145cm height, with hands against her waist, arrogantly looked down at him.

"How dare you show up in front of me as if nothing happened after your threw me off the bicycle?"

"A-are you mad?"

"Of course I am."

"But I had no choice. If I didn't take this job, Kisara would've kicked my ass, you know?"

"Since you abandoned me, I will kick your ass too."

"So what am I supposed to do then?!"

"Just produce your butt, like a grown-up. Then you'll be beaten by both of us. Perhaps, you can choose the way we'll kick you."

"You're silly, there must be an alternative."

The next moment, a gunshot roared, as if breaking through their conversation for the second time. Tadashima finally arrived, holding a revolver, that gave off a gun smoke.

"Hey, you two. Are you going to kill the enemy with comic talks? Let's do our job, Civil Security!"

The blood started spouting from the skin of the newly born Gastrea at the place it was shot, but the next moment, the wound began to heal at an incredible speed. Finally, the .38 caliber bullet from Tadashima's revolver fell out from the wound. Gastrea turned its head towards Tadashima and made a piercing shriek. That was bad.

Before letting out a scream, Rentaro quickly ran up to Tadashima, slammed into him and knocked him down.

"Wha-, what are you doing——"

The black spider made a low jump and with terrifying might scratched the ground, where these two have been standing a moment ago. Tadashima's face turned white.

"Inspector, this is the one-factor Gastrea – the jumping spider."

"The jumping spider?"

"Originally it was a spider that could jump to his prey covering the distance that is many times greater than its own body length. I understood it by its characteristic body color. And——"

Rentaro took Tadashima's revolver.

"The regular bullets are very ineffective against Gastrea. You'll just drive it into a frenzy, so don't use it."

"So how are we supposed to kill it?"

At that moment a deep shadow hanged over them. Tadashima let out a short scream.

Sensing a smell of rotten eggs, Rentaro felt something cold behind his back and turned around. A giant spider with spreaded legs was behind him.

It pointed its body towards Rentaro, opening and closing cheliceral fangs with poison glands at its base.

He saw its big colored body, that raised visceral aversion, and heard the jarring chewing sound of its spinnerets.

Gastrea noticed something nearby and quickly turned its body – there was a little girl standing in front of it. She must have been trembling like a leaf at the sight of spider's spinnerets. Then suddenly the girl was covered with something like a casting net and her stance shook.

"Wh-what is this? So sticky."

The more the girl tried to escape, the more wrapped up in these viscous threads she became.

At that moment Rentaro suspiciously looked at this wet glittering substance of unreal green color on spider's threads. This was the same substance that he had seen at Sumiaki Okajima's house.

"Enju, squat down!"

"Eh?"

The girl couldn't quickly respond to his instructions. The spider cast her slim body aside. Leaving violent scratches on the ground, she was blown away for nearly twenty meters.

"Enju!"

Rentaro instantly drew the pistol from his belt and fired.

Along with the heavy fire from the shot, his hand raised up with the recoil of the gun. When the bullet hit Gastrea, the creature let out a loud shriek and retreated, protecting the body with its legs. However, the wound didn't show any signs of regeneration.

"All right," thought Rentaro and continued shooting. The bullets peppered the spot, where one of its legs was blown off and its body was leaning shakingly. Crushing its hard shell, the .40 caliber bullets created a black hole, and Gastrea's body fluids gushed out of the wound.

After firing ten bullets, the slide of his pistol moved back and stopped, indicating that it was out of ammo. Gastrea curled up in the distance and didn't even twitch.

As he carefully came closer, he noticed that one of the bullets blew off a part of its face along with the fangs. But the next moment – "Oh!" – he realized that only less than half of the bullets hit the creature, moreover, none of it hit its main vital spot.

With a sense of foreboding he swallowed hard.

In an instant the spider raised to its feet, opened the poison glands and dashed toward Rentaro.

Being taken by surprise, he was unable to react quickly. Rentaro stiffened his body, ready to face the inevitable.

At the very nick of time, with a terrific impact sound Gastrea's body was sent flying parallel to the ground. It bounced off once, crushed a stone wall, destroyed telegraph poles in its way and fell onto the ground, raising an enormous cloud of dust. He couldn't instantly understand what has just happened.

"Enju?"

She was standing triumphantly at the place where Gastrea was a moment earlier.

"Uh, you were inattentive. I didn't see this coming."

Tadashima gasped for air. He couldn't believe that just a moment ago this slender girl's dropkick had brushed aside this huge 60kg creature. There was only one explanation.

The girl's usual black eyes sparkled with a bright red color.

She had the same deep crimson pupils like Gastrea.

The surprise written all over Tadashima's face slowly faded away – he understood.

"I see, this little brat is an Initiator."

"I am Rentaro's partner, Enju Aihara. Remember that, Mr. 'public servant'."

The girl announced this with especially strong-willed eyes. Such arrogance was inappropriate for her age, but it was really captivating.

Though Rentaro acknowledged his helplessness, which the ten year old girl so delightfully pointed out, he inserted a spare magazine and carefully approached Gastrea.

The spider was laying on the back with its legs stretched, its body convulsed one last time and the creature died.

Rentaro mildly lowered his head in Tadashima's direction.

"I'm sorry, inspector. I thought its stage was lower."

"Hey, and what about that long speech of yours, 'The regular bullets are very ineffective against Gastrea,' was it all bullshit?"

Rentaro turned his gaze towards Tadashima. He couldn't hide this fact—— he silently showed the bullets inserted in his spare magazine.

Tadashima's slit eyes opened wide with understanding and amusement.

"I see. Varanium bullets."

Rentaro nodded. He put one bullet on his hand and demonstrated it. The tip of gold-colored cartridge – Varanium black bullet – dully reflected the light of the evening sun.

"It is made of Varanium, that prevents regeneration of Gastrea's wounds, as you know."

At the same time, the boy thought that having *this* might mean that humankind can escape its extermination. Gastrea extremely hated this metal. It was told, that if such a creature was put into a room filled with Varanium, it would become weak and die very soon.

"So it's also used in bullet manufacturing."

"Perhaps, the members of Civil Security who use swords or spears as weapons stand out from others, but I prefer bullets."

"Look."

Saying that, Rentaro showed his Springfield XD. Tadashima put a hand to his chin and groaned.

Suddenly Rentaro's sleeve was pulled a couple times. He turned his head and saw Enju, who smiled and vigorously pointed at herself.

"Yeah-yeah. You were cool out there. And you saved me. Satisfied?"

"I also want to tell you something."

Enju was beckoning him, so he had no choice but to lean towards her, making eye contact. He seemed to let out a sigh of grief, thinking that she'll say something like "I slacked off towards the end" or "I want to become stronger."

She swiftly wrapped her hands around his neck and he suddenly felt a warm touch on his lips.

——Mwah!

Her body stiffened and she rapidly moved away. She stood abashed at a distance, her hands behind her back.

"Heh-heh, this is my "thank you". You haven't been my partner for a long time, but you bravely confronted the enemy by yourself, when I was off guard."

"Y-you..."

"Huh, you want more? Well, since it's you, I'll allow you the other *things*."

"S-stupid! Stop saying that, although it's a mere joke. What if someone misinterpre——"

Feeling a sudden chill behind his back, Rentaro turned around. Tadashima took handcuffs out from behind his back, and sidled up to him.

"...You've got good taste, you swine."

Whoosh – the greasy sweat poured from him. Tadashima gazed fixedly at Rentaro.

"Recently some idiot started messing with girls around here. He is about your height, and about your build... What can you say to that?"

"Screw you! You've got it all wrong, it's false accusation! I plead not guilty!"

"You'll explain this at the police station."

"You bastard!"

Rentaro and Tadashima were racing against each other, as if they were drawing a circle around Enju.

"E-Enju, I beg you, tell him something!"

Enju threw out her chest, thanking him for asking.

"We have an intimate relationship that I can't express in words."

Tadashima cocked his revolver.

Eh? Is he going to shoot me?

"She is just lodging at my place!"

"I can't sleep because of him."

"It's because I roll about while I sleep!"

"Will you pledge yourself to me for life?"

"No way!"

For some time Tadashima was looking first at Rentaro then at Enju, comparing them. After a while he put the handcuffs away.

"Tch. I should've cuffed both your hands with these stylish bracelets."

"Oh, come on, inspector, that joke really hurts."

Suddenly Rentaro lowered his eyes onto Enju's back and held his breath. The skin on her back was peeled off and had become a bright red. It was probably the result of her hard landing and scratching the ground.

"Enju, does it hurt?"

Her strong-willed eyes expressed resentment, she sniffed and firmly stared back at him.

"It's alright. It'll heal in no time. I'm just angry that I ruined my clothes. It is torn up to the shoulder straps of my camisole."

And as if confirming the girl's words – the scratches on her back that looked pitiful, started healing right in front of their eyes.

Soon the wounds healed shut as if nothing had happened, the only thing that was left were a beautiful girlish skin color without any body hair and her torn clothes.

Noticing Tadashima's opened mouth with a sidelong glance, she thought that it was a quite natural reaction.

In the case of a human, a scab would be formed over the wound, and after a certain period of time the wound will be healed under it. The fact that her wound healed, skipping that process, proved that she was not an ordinary human.

Superhuman regeneration. That was the benefit given to Initiators, the girls who were able to control Gastrea virus under certain conditions. Among other benefits were their nonstandard physical strength and agility. Also, when they were not using their power, their pupils were deep black.

Rentaro, being a "Promoter", a person who supervises Initiator, was supposed to show her the way.

"By the way, Enju, you talked to the victim before his shape collapsed. Did he tell you anything?"

"Yep, he asked to give his regards to his wife and daughter."

"...I see."

Rentaro looked at his watch, then straightened his back and saluted Tadashima.

"Year 2031, April 28th, 16:30. Initiator Enju Aihara and Promoter Rentaro Satomi. Gastrea has been eliminated."

"Good job, Civil Security."

Though it was a formality, as a chief executive, Tadashima saluted back. When their eyes met, they both smiled, but it was impossible to tell who smiled first.

An innocent voice, unable to read the situation, broke the silence.

"Hey, don't you think that it'd be better to go to the time sale instead of all this?"

"Eh?... Probably."

She hurriedly took out today's folded leaflet out of her pocket. Rentaro became pale.

"W-what? You want to go now?"

"Yeah, if there's another job, pass it to someone else."

For some reason Tadashima mumbled:

"Uhm, well. You've saved me earlier, so... uh, by the way, what's the rush?"

"'Cause bean sprouts are only 6 yen a pack!"

Looking at the shadow of a boy running off and a small shadow frisking behind him like a puppy, Shigetoku Tadashima murmured:

"Bean... sprouts?"

He had been thinking about thanking the boy, who had protected him earlier, but he suddenly felt stupid.

"Chief, are you safe?"

He turned around and saw his subordinates from the sent out search parties, who had finally arrived.

"Though they look like novices, it seems they were of use?"

"Hmm, yeah. Oh, I forgot to ask their 'IP rank'."

He almost unconsciously took out a cigarette from his breast pocket and lighted it. He noticed that his subordinate was staring at the cigarette.

"Smoking, huh?"

"Don't be so strait-laced, I almost died a moment ago."

The subordinate frowned, but Tadashima didn't care, he just deeply inhaled the cigarette smoke and blew it out.

Since the weather was fine, the towering Monoliths were clearly visible far away in the distance.

1.61km in height and 1km in width, these rectangular massive black barriers were scattered at regular intervals, like pylons.

Existing in the middle of nature scenery and looking out of place, the Monoliths somehow were striking people with awe.

They were completely enclosing the Kanto Plain.

——Its inner territory was the last paradise left for humans.

These black chrome stones, that stood close together, were actually lumps of Varanium.

The Monoliths were spread across the whole Kanto Plain – the old Tokyo area, the old Kanagawa prefecture, the old Chiba prefecture and a part of the old Saitama prefecture.

Gastrea extremely hated Varanium. Because of the unique magnetic field emitted by Varanium that functioned as a natural barrier, the Tokyo Area was able to avoid large-scale Gastrea attacks.

Conversely, everything outside of the five Areas remaining in Japan, including Tokyo Area, was swarming with monsters and *monsters that once were humans*. If a feeble person took a single step outside of the Monolith's border, he would be either instantly killed or would become one of *them*.

However, not only Japan was in such situation.

He noticed that the crime-scene units and other agents had gathered around unnoticed; they confiscated all pieces of evidence and stretched around "Keep Out" tapes.

Gastrea appeared ten years ago everywhere around the globe at the same time. They started driving humans away with great force due to their infectivity. One infected person became two, then four, eight – Gastrea numbers increased in geometric progression. Finally humans began feeling desperate, but it was already too late to do something about it.

Suffering many casualties during the large-scale war, all countries used Monoliths, that were finally in the stage of practical use, to build barriers. Ten years have passed, but the humans were still frantically holing up inside its boundaries.

Humankind was defeated in the Gastrea World War.

The rising cigarette smoke momentarily dissolved in the rays of the setting sun.

Japan has been healing its wounds for ten long years and finally the civilization level has been restored to that of the first half of the 2020s.

Tadashima stamped on the cigarette butt and gave a sidelong glance at his capable subordinates, who were quickly moving around the scene.

From time to time they hunted aimlessly straying Gastrea in its early stages, thus preventing a pandemic. At first it was the police and those under its command – the riot police, the Self-Defense Forces etc. But now this burden was imposed on Civil Security. And the police ended up cleaning up after the incidents.

Feeling a strong smell of spring with his skin, Tadashima with untypical sentimentality watched the backs of the two people who were almost faded in the distance.

Initiator and Promoter.

They battle in pairs.

Fighting against Gastrea with the power they've mastered—— they're the last hope of the humankind.

Part 2

"Do you have any last words before you die, Satomi?"

A cold sweat was running down Rentaro's cheeks. He continued to retreat, but several moments later his back hit a wall.

A girl with a firmly-set mouth and folded arms, who was talking to him in perturbed voice, irritatedly clattered the floor with her boots.

He had expected something like that, but she seemed *really* angry at him.

A beauty in black was standing right in front of Rentaro's eyes. Her smooth skin, white as light snow, made a nice contrast to her jet-black silky straight hair. Her white skin was exposed only from her face, neck, hands and thighs, and it was slightly visible between her skirt and high socks. So, except for the red ribbon on the front of her worn black sailor suit of Miwa Academy for Girls, her clothes were completely black and white.

Her narrow slit eyes were piercing; her face was cute when she laughed, but it usually looked sullen and she just kept silent – so this was just a waste of time.

Although Rentaro was filled with dismay, he was desperately trying to defend himself—— in an extremely tiny voice.

"But it's water under the bridge."

"That's absurd!"

A loud cry thundered across the cramped room. When Rentaro dodged a fierce punch aimed at him at the last moment, the girl vehemently scowled at him.

"Why are you dodging? It's irritating."

"Be reasonable!"

Rentaro showed his back and started running. The girl raised her fists and chased after him; they kept running in circles around the lounge suite.

——*Damn it. This day is just full of troubles.*

"You are... beating... a hasty retreat..."

Lacking physical strength, the girl soon dropped out. She was trying to regulate her breathing, taking deep breaths.

"Hey, I'll do my best on the next job you give me, Kisara."

"Don't talk nonsense! It was your last chance!"

"And", she continued glaring at Rentaro:

"When you are at work, call me 'Chief', not 'Kisara'."

She pushed back her long hair and quickly returned to her desk. Saying, "You are good for nothing," she sat in an armchair.

Rentaro gave a sigh of relief. Not only had his ass been kicked this day, but upon returning to the office, an inhuman punishment was waiting for him there.

A huge ebony office desk, the size of a grand piano, and a well tanned leather armchair.

It strangely harmonized with the image of the girl in sailor suit, who was sitting there in a leisurely fashion.

Kisara Tendo. She was the youngest child of Tendo family, in whose care Rentaro was put under ten years ago. She was also the Chief of Tendo Civil Security Company, where Rentaro was working.

"So you are saying that you were in hurry, willing to buy something at the time sale, the bill of which is lying on that table, and on the way there you noticed that you forgot to receive compensation from the police?"

"...Yeah."

Rentaro looked away and muttered bluntly.

Earlier when he noticed this, he hurriedly called inspector Tadashima, who replied: "What? But I was certain that you are doing this for free. Since it's already in the past, let's say it was a *first time free campaign*. Next time I'll pay you well and you'll be at my beck and call. Mwahahahah", after that he roared with laughter and hung up.

Kisara put her chin atop of her elbow and continued with glum face:

"But still, you bought two packs of bean sprouts?"

"Y-yes!... They were giving only one pack a person, so I took Enju with me, and we bought two packs!"

Thinking, *Why the hell am I informing her about this?" Rentaro hurriedly changed the subject of the conversation.*

"..... Do you want some?"

She threw the pack of bean sprouts in his face.

"You know what, Satomi. The salary for this month is zero. You might think, 'whose fault is it?' – it's yours, you worthless weak idiot. And you still think that reporting the results of your job to the chief is less important than talks about a time sale in the supermarket?"

Suddenly Kisara clenched her fists and trembled. But the next moment she raised up, without removing her hands from the table.

"——Moreover, why didn't you tell *me* about this time sale?!"

As if timing the moment, her belly rumbled. Holding her stomach, Kisara lost her nerve and lowered into the chair. Her eyes were empty.

"Uh... Wish I could have... a beefsteak."

"...Me too."

Because Kisara parted from her family and was earning her own living, at that time she was strapped for cash. This fact, however, contradicted her celebrity-like appearance.

"Satomi..."

"What?"

"Do your work."

"Ugh, stomach problems?"

"It's getting better when I work."

Tendo Civil Security Company occupied the third floor in a multi-tenant building named "Happy Building". Kisara looked through the window at the people returning home from work and lightly shook her head letting out a sigh.

"I didn't imagine that managing a company would be so difficult."

"...You thought it would be easy?"

"Well, stocks and money orders are easy. But here, you can get profit only if you are able to do some extraordinary things, so it's really impossible. Plus I have such a worthless idiot like you."

"So a cabaret on the second floor and a gay bar on the first don't concern you?... Hm, aren't there loan sharks on the fourth floor?"

"I have no idea. It really doesn't matter where the office is located, if the company is good."

Well, you can say that.

"What about distributing leaflets and tissue paper? That way we can steadily advertise our company."

"If you are doing regular things, you'll receive nothing but regular results. But I want a greater impact."

"What if *you* change into maid's gown and distribute leaflets?"

Rentaro implied that if the look is terrific, than ten out of ten people will turn around, but it seemed that this nuance wasn't conveyed to Kisara. She blushed and straightened her back.

"I am *Tendo*! You want me to disguise myself as a lower class person, like a waitress? I won't! You should go out on the street yourself and then, screaming 'Tendo Civil Security Company is here!', suddenly burn or blow something up in public!"

"But that is terrorism..."

Rentaro looked around, partly dumbfounded.

"Hey, Chief. I am having a serious talk here. Let's hire somebody else."

In spite of the fact that it took great efforts to reserve the whole floor for the office of Tendo Civil Security Company, it was a real waste of space, because there were only two employees – Rentaro and Enju.

"I have people who seem to be of use."

Kisara gave a dry answer and snapped her fingers, dropping this matter.

"Satomi, make me some tea."

"Do it yourself."

"Huh, what if an idiot, who managed to forget taking the compensation for the job, does this instead?"

"Tch, alright, the tea will be ready in a minute, Miss."

Why is she so self-conceited despite leading such a poor life? He poured hot water into a teapot and put it on the table in front of Kisara.

"Uhm, thank you."

Kisara continued tapping the keyboard of a notebook, without looking in Rentaro's direction. Then she suddenly raised her head and their eyes met.

"So, you are saying that this Gastrea that you've killed, was an infected person?"

"That's right", he answered bluntly and then continued, presuming her next question:

"We haven't found the Gastrea, that was the source of infection, but it is probably the same one-factor spider model. Since it's not a bird or an insect, the other companies might have already found and dealt with it. If its stage is greater than third, they would definitely call us for help, but then again a biohazard warning hasn't been announced."

Since one-factor Gastrea, like the one Rentaro has killed, were just scaled-up animals that inhabited the Earth, *they still were charming*. However, two-factor Gastrea, especially the ones that included more than four different DNAs, had such appearances that they could be called nothing but mutants.

Gastrea's size at stages I-IV was increasing proportionally, but as its stage increased, its strength also increased at proportionate speed. That's why the members of different Civil Security Companies joined hands in order to exterminate Gastrea, in case they felt that a task was beyond their power. And they did this despite the fact that all the Companies were on quite bad terms with each other.

When they don't call us, it means they were able to handle the situation by themselves, right?

Kisara lowered her gaze onto the display of the notebook and brushed off Rentaro's opinion.

"There's no information about it. Moreover, there aren't even any witness reports."

"Huh?"

Kisara turned the notebook by 180 degrees. The display showed a map. It was the website of Civil Security Agency, where one could check all the places of battles with Gastrea and places where Gastrea were witnessed in the last 90 days.

"This is..."

Rentaro raised his eyebrows and looked at Kisara. She lightly nodded.

"There are none, right?"

"Yeah... But, it's impossible that there was not a single witness report."

"They are not here."

Kisara pushed up her hair and cast an upward suggestive glance at Rentaro.

Rentaro narrowed his eyes and again looked at the maps and the text.

"Why didn't the government issue a warning in the neighborhood? This is an important matter."

"Satomi, the government isn't incompetent, but they don't resort to compulsory measures like evacuation warnings. So there's no point in expecting anything in this situation. Well, that's actually *our* job."

What an awful job we have. Rentaro clicked his tongue and gently shook his head.

"We need a professional advice. I'll go and talk to 'sensei'."

"I'll also try to find out indirectly what the people in the same line of business know. Satomi, we should hunt down this Gastrea as soon as possible."

"Got it."

Kisara closed her beautiful eyelashes and sipped the tea. Rentaro cast a furtive sidelong glance at his chief. He always knew that for some reason or another she put human life above everything else.

Having no way of knowing Rentaro's thoughts, Kisara finished using her notebook and closed it. She folded her arms and stretched her body. He heard a delightful crackle of her back. Rentaro's eyes accidentally fell on her ample bosom that pushed up the sailor suit, and he hurriedly looked away.

"Hm, by the way, where's Enju?"

"Uh, she felt sleepy and went home. If you are also going home, I'll accompany you halfway."

"Sorry, today I need to undergo hemodialysis, so I'll go to the hospital."

"Yeah, right."

Kisara sipped her cold tea and looked out over the office. Rentaro followed her gaze with his eyes.

The reception, where they talked with clients, faced the humble table used by the only employees – Rentaro and Enju. On rare occasion they stayed overnight, so there also was a small kitchen behind the curtain where they could cook.

This crumbled narrow room was cold during winter. The room couldn't be called comfortable, but surprisingly they didn't hate it.

"It's already been a year since you've became Promoter and met Enju."

"It's *still* the first year. We both haven't reached our goal, even by half."

Kisara tilted her head a little to one side and smiled.

"Satomi, you really changed since the time you've met Enju. You smile more often and learned to cook. I never thought that you might be like this."

Rentaro abruptly turned his face away.

"It's not a big deal."

"Satomi, I'm wondering what your current goal might be?"

"Eh?"

Suddenly his heart started pounding.

"Do you want to search for Enju's parents? And what about your mother and father, Satomi? When you were a kid, you often used to say: 'There's no doubt that my parents are alive, so I'm going to find them'. But you stopped saying this recently. Do you still think the same way?"

She wasn't particularly angry at him or reproaching him, she just kept staring in his direction. But Rentaro couldn't stand this, so he shook his head.

"It doesn't concern you——"

He intended to pretend being as calm as possible, but he spat it out in a rather hostile tone.

"Stop bothering me! That's enough. Because there's no doubt that my parents are dead."

Damn it. Rentaro was plodding down the night road holding his head covered with his arms.

On his way, a woman at the cabaret on the second floor winked at him, saying, "Won't you come in this time?". When he descended to the first floor, a brawny guy with a close-cut beard from the gay bar winked at him too – "Come in, I think you're a good tachi". Then not far from the building a loan shark from Hiroshima Yakuza greeted him, "Hey, Rentaro, it's pretty hot today, huh?". But Rentaro gave all of them vague answers.

When the conversation moved to the topic about his early years, it was really difficult for him to control his feelings, but he didn't intend to act foolishly like taking it out on other people.

Rentaro stuck both his hands into pockets, tilted his head back to the very limit and gazed at the starry night sky.

I have no choice. Tomorrow I'll apologize to her as hard as I can.

The place where Rentaro was heading to was a hospital affiliated to Magata Public University. In the laboratory located nearby the light was always on.

The ground area of Magata University starting from the computer department and stretching to the department of agriculture was vast. Magata High School, which Rentaro attended, looked like a miniature garden, compared to it.

The University hospital was located near the school building, almost 300 meters further from it, to be precise.

Rentaro was a frequent visitor, so he freely passed the reception. The front entrance of the hospital was opened and an odor of antiseptic was permeating the air. When he passed the group of people there, they all looked back at him with displeased faces, because he was wearing the school uniform – it was at the same time his ordinary clothes and work clothes.

So what? You have any objections? Though he thought that way, he still bowed to them in silence and passed by.

Heading north, the number of people suddenly decreased and then a square hole abruptly appeared in the ground at the end of the hallway. At first glance it might seem to be a pitfall, but upon closer inspection it was clear that there were stairs at an acute angle.

While he was descending the stairs, he wondered what the faces of people, who were unaware of the real situation, would be, if they were told that there was a morgue down there built as an extension and a mysterious person was living there among the dead bodies. They would probably feel cold, but it won't be because of the lower temperature.

He felt an aromatic odor after opening the doors with a carving of an ostentatious devil's bust, whose purpose was to frighten the people who came there thus leaving the owner alone. The inner area was half-dark and surprisingly spacious. The whole floor was covered with green tiles; it was eerie like in an operation room. But upon closer look, there were an underwear, a lunch box, a blackboard fully covered with probably German words – one might say, the odors of human life were floating in the air.

However, the main owner of this space was nowhere to be seen.

"Sensei, where are you?"

"I'm here."

When he turned towards the voice, he was startled.

In front of him was a naked muscular body of more than 180cm height with sunken sockets in his eyes. There was neither a single hair on his head, nor had he a skin, it seemed to be removed recently. It was a corpse of an unknown man.

"Whoa!"

It seemed that it was the man who answered Rentaro, but dead people can't talk.

Rentaro wasn't a fan of ghost stories.

"Boo!" A woman in a familiar white robe appeared from behind him, and Rentaro felt relieved.

"D-don't scare me, sensei!"

"Hello, Rentaro. Welcome to the Abyss." She spread her arms in a theatrical way.

She was wearing a tight skirt and a long trailing white robe.

Her skin was pale as if she was unhealthy, her presence was weak and she gave away a feeling of a ghost. Her untidy long forelocks were partially hiding her eyes, but on a closer look she was a real beauty.

Sumire Muroto. The Gastrea researcher that headed a legal medicine lab.

She was the queen of this dimly lit basement, and on top of that she was a severe hikikomori. If she were left there, she would stay there by herself until her food savings run out.

"Who is this man?"

"Charlie, I forgot his real name. My boyfriend."

"But what about that woman named Susan?"

"Unfortunately, she is gone. He is her replacement. Corpses are fine, they don't talk useless things. They are the only ones who can understand my feelings."

Saying this, she tenderly pressed her cheek against the embalmed body.

Though Rentaro already put up with this, he rubbed his hands and watched this scene with dreary thoughts.

She extremely disliked contact with other people, so in the University she was boldly scorned by everyone. Her motto was: "There are only two types of people in this world - dead and those who'll die soon".

I'll quickly finish business, and get out of here. Rentaro was about to open his mouth, but Sumire spoke first.

"Not long ago they delivered the stage I Gastrea that you've killed. Couldn't you have done it more cleanly? Its flesh was damaged with bullet impacts. Moreover, the bullets are dispersed in different directions. Nobita-kun is lewd, lazy and a coward, but still he's a superb marksman. Though you are also lewd, lazy and a coward, you're an awful shooter. I'm wondering if one could be any worse? Well, it might be blunt, but I'll ask anyway – why didn't you kill yourself already? You probably don't have any wish in this world anyway."

"You're implying that I'm that hopeless?!"

Rentaro let out a sigh.

Such a depressed beauty was entrusted by the government to perform Gastrea's dissection and research. It might be hard to believe, but she actually had a very high IQ and long time ago she was a darling of the scientific society.

"By the way, have you had your dinner yet?"

"Huh?"

"I'm asking if you had dinner."

"No... not yet."

"In that case you should try my cooking first."

She stood up, took out a plate from a microwave and unwrapped it. At first glance it seemed like a pure white gruel, but it had a form of an oatmeal being half-solid. She spooned it up and it made some strange sound typical for a sticky liquid substance. It smelled like it had gone bad. *What the hell was it?*

Large beads of sweat broke out on his ignorant face.

"...Sensei, do you know that 'Tasty Wheat' from the Matrix movie?"

"Yes, they seem to be delicious. Guri and Gura pancakes, Laputa pans and Tasty Wheat – these three meals from 2D world are the ones that people want to eat the most."

"What weird mix is this?"

"Hm? Look, no matter how flat the TV screen is, Matrix is a live-action movie, so what about 3D treatment? What do you think?"

"Let's talk about work instead!"

"Eat it quickly. If you won't eat, I won't talk."

"A-are you serious?..."

Rentaro looked at the dimly-lit ceiling and being in dilemma, looked at the *Tasty Wheat*. As though in mockery of him, the air bubbles appeared on its surface and gurgled.

Good God! He put it in his mouth.

To his surprise it was really good!

——Well, no, there wasn't any hint of such a dreamy thought. The next moment an atrocity started and he felt as if his taste buds were struck with piercing pain.

"Guooo, my throat itches!"

"So how is it? Delicious?"

"...Do I seem like a person who just ate something delicious?"

Sumire connected index fingers and thumbs of both hands, making an improvised camera frame. Looking through it, she hummed:

"If I were a photographer, I would call this 'Agony —Between hell and purgatory—'."

"In addition to being extremely sweet, it has some nasty sour flavor. What the hell is this?"

"Ah, it's almost melted, but it was a donut once. I took it out from the corpse's stomach."

Rentaro put his hand to his mouth.

"If you need a washstand, it's right over there."

He stuck his fingers down his throat and threw up the contents off his stomach.

"Barf, ga-ha!..... But it's a piece of evidence!"

"Not anymore, the incident has been resolved. I've asked the detective in charge if it can be eaten and he gave willing consent."

"It's a blatant lie!"

"You are so focused on picky little details."

"No! Not at all!"

"Oh, yeah, look. Finally there are three people in this catacombs. What about taking an Oath of the Peach Garden like in 'Romance of the Three Kingdoms'? 'Though we were born on different days, we seek to die on the same day and at the same time.'—— Uh, but Charlie is already dead. Kha. Aha-ha-ha!"

Now I really want to get out of here.

"If we have to assign roles, then Charlie would be Guan Yu, you will be Liu Bei and I will be Zhang Fei. How's that? Hey, such a tragic face doesn't fit Liu Bei, I don't feel even a hint of his virtue. This role doesn't suit you at all."

"...And Zhang Fei who can love only corpses is OK?"

He felt completely exhausted and drooped his shoulders. Sumire made a note, cackling.

"Sensei, about the Gastrea, that was the source of infection—— Perhaps, it's the same one-factor spider model, but there are neither witness reports nor extermination reports so far. This will just lead to more victims. We need to eliminate it as soon as possible. If it's hiding somewhere, where it might be, what do you think?"

"Well, let me think."

Sumire started playing around, rotating the chair she was sitting on and crossing her legs the other way.

"It could have opened the lid of a manhole and went underground. Then it closed the lid neatly."

Rentaro narrowed his eyes.

"Using spider legs?"

"Spiders have two times more limbs than humans, don't you think it's easier for them?"

"But don't the books say that 'Gastrea are low grade creatures who don't have intelligence and live by natural instincts'?"

Sumire shook her head as if in disappointment and spread her arms.

"For some reason in Japan the fact that Gastrea don't have intelligence is an accepted theory, but in reality it has been proven that it's almost a mistake. And now this theory is accepted in the West."

"Well, I also think that... Although your theory that it might be hiding underground is close to truth, you're wrong. Recently even surveillance cameras in the sewer system are equipped with night vision. So if it went into sewers according to your theory, then it'll be caught on one of those cameras."

"Wow, when did such things appear in Japan? It seems that because of staying here I have too little knowledge of what's going on outside. I can't stand that. Uhm, so this Gastrea got the traits of jumping spider... Hm, you seem to know a lot about animals."

Rentaro scratched his head and mumbled with downcast eyes.

"...Well, I know a little bit from natural science and ethology. I liked Fabre's 'Souvenirs Entomologiques' according to the elongation system described there..."

"Ha-ha, I understand. You were one of those who didn't have any friends and spent time staring at insects? I guess you were in raptures when you were sinking ant's nests. 'Now drown. It's Noah's flood~. Feel the rage of God~~'"

"Are you trying to imitate me?! Hey, don't make unsupported assumptions!"

Sumire put her elbow on the armrest, her chin on the elbow and made a broad grin.

"You are still good-for-nothing. Being moody herself, Kisara had noticed you. If she felt inclined to, she could have made you her property. It would've been better."

Rentaro frowned. *Why did we end up talking about this?*

"Sensei, don't you know? Kisara knows all the mysteries of iai known as 'Tendo Sword Drawing Technique', while I have the lowest grade in 'Tendo Combat Technique' – I'll be beaten to death. But in fact, she has poor kidneys, so she can move only for a short period of time, that's why the only thing she does is office work."

When they were young, Kisara always protected Rentaro from her brothers, who mistreated him. But since then and up to this moment he still wasn't convinced that she treated him as a servant.

Nowadays, I have become stronger and I am able to protect her, but still..."

"Hm, well, let's get back to the topic. Do you know any distinguishing traits of jumping spiders?"

"The color of its body. And it's also known for jumping towards its prey."

Sumire took out another *Tasty Wheat* from the microwave, she slowly took a spoon of it and put it in her mouth. *Yuck!*

"Right, they pounce on their prey with terrific jumping power. However, if they became human-sized, it actually doesn't mean that their jumping power has increased accordingly, did you know that?"

"Eh... really?"

"Hey, you seemed to be an expert. For example, ticks can jump as high as Tokyo Tower from humans point of view, but if they became as big as humans, they won't be able to support their bodies due to lack of jumping power, even their skin won't be able to breathe sufficiently. Based on the laws of gravity and scaling principles such creature won't be able to live. However— the Gastrea virus overrules all of this."

A mysterious smile, that appeared on the face of the woman in white garb, broke off the conversation.

Rentaro was urged to stay silent. This was rather the physics area than entomology. It was a closed book for him, so there was no room for an argument.

"The moment it turns into Gastrea, the hardness of its skin as well as the body functions rise in accordance to its size. As a result, the bigger the Gastrea, the stronger it is. So the Gastrea virus that remakes the designs of animals is nothing but a threat. Though it's quite similar to the reverse transcription of retrovirus, it doesn't reproduce its own copy, but rather analyzes the characteristics of host's genes and remodels body shape in the most suitable way. The problem here is the speed of this process. Compared to any other species living on Earth, the encroachment speed with which the Gastrea virus changes the structure of DNA is nonstandard. Dawkins would probably wet his pants while standing. Then, after the internal encroachment exceeds 50%, a person can no longer retain human shape. When this process called body collapse is finished, the host turns into Gastrea. In some cases the host can get new abilities that he didn't possess before the transformation. Like this one received the jump ability after mutation."

Rentaro noticed that Sumire's plate became empty. *How the hell she can have such tastes?*

"What if the fact that no one was able to find this Gastrea, despite looking everywhere, is because of an original trait that it has?"

"You mean something like optical camouflage?"

"It might be much simpler, like chameleon's mimicry. If it really has an ability to bend light, then tomorrow the whole Tokyo Area will be wiped out due to a pandemic."

"Don't worry. It's my and Enju's – Promoter's and Initiator's – duty to prevent such things from happening."

"Enju..."

"... What's wrong?"

"Sometimes I can't help feeling uneasy because of the 'Cursed Children'. Especially, when I became aware of their origins. Ten years ago, almost at the same time when Gastrea appeared, these children, who have genes that can control the Gastrea virus, started coming to this world, as if defying Gastrea. At first they were hailed as the children send by God to confront Gastrea, but in the end it was a complete mistake."

As if seeing a dream Sumire narrowed her eyes and ran her sight in the air.

"They are nothing but people who don't get blood infections that leads to changing shape for an ordinary people. We thought that they are immune to air-borne infection. But in fact, multiple experiments have been held that confirmed that this infection was neither respiratory nor could it be transmitted sexually.

After entering the human body through the mouth, the virus doesn't infect the person, but it doesn't die out instantly either. Sometimes if it enters the body of a pregnant woman, its virulence is accumulated in the fetus and the child is born with this virus inside him or her.

The newly born 'Cursed Children' have red eyes, but apart from that fact they are humans without doubt. In other words, they are carrying the Gastrea virus, but its development is extremely slow. If an ordinary person receives a huge dose of the virus at once, after a short period of time he won't be able to retain human shape; so I'm wondering for how many years these children won't change, this fact itself is frightening. It's really interesting. Look, I managed to explain it without using any technical terms. Even such a silly person like you can understand the main points of what I just said, right?"

"I wish you always talked to me that way..."

He wanted to say some sharp things to her, but thanks to her he better understood the matter. *Mimetic camouflage, huh?*

In spite of everything, she was a remarkable person.

"Well, I'm off, sensei."

Sumire smiled ironically and saw him off waving her hand.

"Till your next visit, FBI Agent Mr Starling."

"......See you later, *Hannibal Lecter*."

"Ah! Rentaro, you're late!"

When he reached his loved shabby apartment, a window at the bathroom on the second floor suddenly opened and together with clouds of white steam Enju leaned out at the window. Although he was glad that Enju welcomed him with a face beaming with smiles and waved at him, he wasn't pleased with the fact that she was completely naked.

"Hey, silly, what if someone sees you?! Close the window!"

"Don't worry. My *body* is yours only!"

"Please, listen to what I'm saying. It's embarrassing for me!"

Rentaro ran up the stairs to the second floor and inserted a key in a door at the corner. He burst into his eight-tatami single room apartment and went to the dressing room. He heard the sound of running water and saw Enju's slim silhouette. Her figure seemed humble and at the same time lithe and very beautiful.

He became flustered for a moment, but then noticed a piece of paper on the door with clumsy written text: "Feel free to look". In an instant he lost all his energy and felt exhausted.

Rentaro heard a voice coming out of the bathroom.

"You're late. I guess, you've been doing some nasty things with Kisara, huh?"

Rentaro plopped down and folded his arms.

"Shut up! She attacked me saying 'Do your work!'"

"Aha-ha, I see. I thought this might happen."

"You are a really awful lodger..."

"By the way, what about dinner? Seems like my stomach is going to cling to my back."

"Alright, alright."

Rentaro gathered Enju's clothes scattered all over the place, put it in a basket together with his own dirty clothes and went to the launderette at the first floor.

Since there wasn't a soul in there he decided to use a brand new washing machine.

He thought that Enju would protest against washing her clothes together with his own, but to his surprise she said: "I would love to imagine how your heart would pound when you'll wear clothes knowing that they were washed together with my underwear", so he washed them together. He thought that because he added detergent, there was nothing to worry about. But when they finished washing together, he went numb and his heart was pounding.

Thinking that there would be no thieves, he got back to the room while the clothes were still being washed. He opened a refrigerator and lined up the food ingredients including bean sprouts that he had bought earlier. For a while he just stood there, thinking.

Today we will have egg soup, burdock roots with slightly old carrots cooked in soy sauce and then fried cabbage with leftover bean sprouts. After deciding what to cook, the rest was quick.

He put on a pink apron over his school uniform and started cooking with lightning speed. While operating his cooking chopsticks he was humming some tune.

Enju had been cooking once after pressuring Rentaro to allow her to, but her cooking was absolutely disgusting, so he swore not to let her in the kitchen again. He was really scared to eat Sumire's cooking because apart from an awful taste, he couldn't know for sure where the ingredients came from. When Kisara was cooking, the kitchen turned into a war zone, going up in flames and explosions.

Why are all the women around me absolutely incapable at cooking? Wish I had met a girl who can make miso soup better than me.

With such thoughts the last thing, the soy sauce, had become slightly gold-colored. Rentaro turned off the fire, removed the apron and looked at his watch. It was 8PM.

He collected the clothes from the laundry and returned to the room. Enju had just finished her long bath.

When she looked at the kitchen, she exclaimed: 'Wow!' like a child and jumped.

"Wait, you can't eat yet."

Enju turned her vehement gaze at Rentaro.

"Why?! When I came home, I rinsed my mouth and washed my hands!"

"That's not the case."

"I already sent around circular notices. And I didn't doodle there as I did earlier."

"Nope, not that."

"I've watched TV for 3 hours only, not a minute more!"

"That's also not the case."

"Hm, today is probably not my turn to take out the garbage."

She couldn't stand any longer and started moaning.

"Please pass me the food. Or do you want me to starve to death?"

Enju noticed something, blushed and looked at Rentaro with upturned eyes.

"Don't tell me that you want me to get *sexually aroused* because of an empty stomach?"

Rentaro put his hands on her shoulders.

"First of all put your pants on. Then we'll talk."

"Gochisousama."

"Gochisousama!"

When Rentaro put down his chopsticks and bowed, the well-trained Enju did the same.

"Your cooking is delicious. How do you manage to do it using such plain ingredients? You're a magician."

Enju, who had changed into casual clothes, with a shining face looked at Rentaro. He made a wry smile as if saying: "You're exaggerating." But he didn't mean any offense, because she praised him.

"Uhm, yeah, you're right. I'm always trying to be imaginative and creative, Watson."

"Who? By the way, do you think I'd be able to cook like you in the near future?"

"Eh, uhm, well... I guess."

Rentaro replied having not the slightest idea.

"Everyone has something he is really good at."

"You don't know when to stop, do you?"

Rentaro tapped her head; Enju smiled and stuck out her tongue.

At this moment he noticed a small cardboard lying near Enju.

"Enju... What is this?"

"Ah, it's a new notebook! It was delivered not long ago."

"...How much did it cost?"

"I found the cheapest place, so I was able to buy the newest model for 180000 yen."

"One hundred eighty thousand..."

Rentaro felt dizzy when he stood up, and covered his head with his hands.

Since Enju also was a member of Tendo Civil Security Company, she was well paid by Kisara, but her salary was quite big for a child pocket money. Enju, who was always madly buying various things, ignoring the fact that Rentaro was pinching pennies, was the source of his troubles.

Enju noticed Rentaro's wistful gaze, a broad grin inappropriate for a child appeared on her face.

"If money is a problem we can always get a loan."

"You little devil. Because of you I always get in trouble..."

Once, when they were on the edge of poverty and were almost evicted from the apartment, Rentaro borrowed money from Enju, who reluctantly gave it to him, and paid the rent. The next day, due to the fact that Enju advertised their conversation exaggerating it and putting it in an amusing way, he was presented with a blunt nickname from their neighbors: "Lolicon gigolo, financially supported by a ten year old girl" (people living in the same apartment building were also informed about this). After this incident he desperately tried to manage on his own salary.

Rentaro carried dirty tableware to the kitchen, and then suddenly noticed the time on his watch. He took out an unused pressure-type syringe from a dresser and tapped it with his fingernail.

"Enju, it's time for injection."

"A-Already?"

He gestured for her to give him her arm. Enju, who hated injections, produced her arm, then stiffened her body and shut her eyes. Rentaro smiled wryly and pushed the piston.

Her skinny body twitched. The blue medicine was sucked into her arm, soft and small like a twig.

Once a day an Initiator was obligated to take the medicine that suppressed the internal encroachment. Neglecting this increased the percentage of internal encroachment and in the end led to turning into Gastrea.

The birth of these girls was special. Almost all women went half insane after they gave birth to a child with red eyes who carried the Gastrea virus inside.

For a certain period of time, it was quite common to give birth to a child in a river and kill him right there by drowning. Sometimes people playing by the river witnessed corpses of infants being washed ashore. Rentaro also had seen such a thing a long time ago, it happened only once but it implanted in his childish mind a feeling of meaninglessness that was impossible to describe.

Rentaro found himself staring at Enju's face, who closed her eyes and was bearing with the pain of the injection.

Enju, who used to laugh, cry and get angry a lot.

Up until this moment she showed her feelings, but it took almost whole year.

Every time he remembered the first time they were introduced to each other a year ago, he felt a stinging pain in his chest.

When they were introduced through the mediation of International Initiator Supervision Organization (IISO), he was confused by the gaze of Enju's wild eyes, full of hostility and distrust of other people. He hadn't experienced such rejection ever before.

But nowadays, she showed a smile, he thought that she was a bit too smart for her age, but even that detail didn't stop him from loving her. Of course, he loved her like a sister who is much younger than him—— no, this may sound like bragging, but he loved her like a daughter.

"Enju, it's over."

Her watery eyes slowly opened and her pink bewitching lips moved slightly as if convulsed. For some reason Rentaro hurriedly looked down with a guilty conscience.

"What's wrong, Rentaro?"

"N-nothing—"

He never mentioned it, but recently Enju became very attractive. If Kisara was a gloomy beauty, then Enju probably was in directly opposite position.

When Enju got out of the bath and loitered around naked, Rentaro was slightly embarrassed, but he didn't want her to change at all. It was more like——

"Well, the daily work is finished. The dinner is also over. When I satisfy my appetite, I don't want to do anything else."

Enju shyly hung her head and spread her arms, as if saying "Take me".

"Yeah, good night."

Rentaro pulled the cord of electric lamp twice, lay and put a quilt over his head. A moment later he was hit on the top of his head so hard that the skull creaking was heard.

"Guooo!"

"What's the meaning of this ignoring? When a lady wishes something, a gentleman ought to yield to her wishes without a word!"

"Screw you! A "lady", when you're just ten year old. Stop talking nonsense."

"Then tell me why I'm not a lady?!"

Enju threw out her chest.

"Well, first of all ladies are discreet and prudent. Plus you are flat-chested."

"Huh?!"

She clenched her fists and flamed red.

"Enju, a person must know when to give up."

"Kisara is evil. When I'll be her age, I'll have a big breast!"

"She doesn't have any strange demonic powers! I guarantee this, because we bathed together when we were kids."

He was surprised at himself for such a perverted remark he just made.

"Whaaat?! I shouldn't have bought the notebook, I should have saved the money for my future breast enlargement surgery."

She thought that it's a bad idea to have thoughts of breast implants for an elementary school student, and then she regained her balance.

"But! I've heard there are plenty of pitiful people like you, who can't have relationship with women. You love hearing things like "Hey, give Enju a love injection", don't you? Sumire said that. That's gross."

His head ached and he felt the pressure in his temples.

"Please, don't entice me into the path to Hell. And where do you even learn such words?"

Enju threw out her chest self-importantly.

"I used Google."

"Google is bad! Look where it might lead you."

"Come on, let's become man and wife. Let's do it right now! And then I can fulfill all of your perverted wishes."

Enju started jumping on the floor, so that this sound could be heard at the lower floor, making people think that Rentaro was not only a lolicon, but also a sexual pervert. The resident at the lower floor, who was roused from his sleep, became furious and started thrusting a bamboo spear into the ceiling. It became even more annoying.

Rentaro held his head covered with his arms. Leaving this aside, she was a cute girl.

He tilted his head, looked at his watch and sighed. *When can I go to sleep today?*

She blushed and turned her face with clear-cut features at Rentaro.

"Alright, I'll undress!"

"Don't!"

Part 3

Tired of the noisy chirping of sparrows outside the window, Rentaro glanced at the apathetic looking boy reflected in a mirror. The dark circles around his twitching half-closed eyes indicated the lack of sleep and his somewhat unhappy face made him look like a villain. He straightened the collar of his 'black-suit' uniform and put on a tie.

Deep down he thought: "I don't want to go to school."

He heard the horoscope from an announcer on the TV that was always turned on. Today, as usual, Taurus were supposed to have bad luck with money. In addition to that the day might get even worse because of supposed bad luck with health. *I hope this won't come true.*

He took the whistling kettle off the stove and poured the hot water in a cup that had instant coffee inside.

Nice morning smell filled the room. He closed his eyes and deeply breathed in through his nose.

Suddenly the front door flung open with great force and Enju rushed into the room, she seemed very anxious from early morning.

"Rentaro, the landlady let us borrow a bicycle!"

Yesterday in a hurry he forgot his bicycle near the crime scene. But because they now had another bicycle they could avoid being late... to his regret. The number of possible excuses to stay home was getting less and less. Plus, there was an "agreement" with the head of the student council, so he can't even get a day off without permission.

He poured the coffee in his stomach, took a remote controller and started searching for some good TV channel. When he was about to turn the TV off, he heard the reporter's yell, "Please, take a look!" that made both Rentaro and Enju instinctively direct their attention to the TV screen.

An agitated reporter squeezing a microphone in his hand was standing in the Tokyo district №1, Seikyo. It wasn't hard to guess who was living in such characteristic district with paved roads and trimmed trees.

At this moment the TV picture changed and a snow-white girl appeared on a balcony.

She was wearing several layers of clothes, completely white and thin as Japanese paper, and a veil over her head, making her garment look like a wedding dress. It seemed as if her clothes were covered with a thick layer of snow.

Let alone her skin, even her hair was white.

"...Seitenshi."

A voice leaked from Rentaro's throat, faintly as if the spirit had flown from his body.

Ten years ago Japan had been divided into five Areas. This girl was the ruler of one of them, the Tokyo Area.

She was appointed to this position of the third generation of Seitenshi after the death of the previous one. Because of her unworldly beauty and absolutely real acumen, she gained an overwhelming support among people compared to her two predecessors.

"Rentaro, look."

Enju pointed at a man with a rugged face in his seventies standing near this smiling girl. It was a man of high stature and in good shape, wearing hakama. Judging by his body build he seemed to be a bodyguard or someone of that kind.

"Tch, *the old man*?"

Kikunojo Tendo, Seitenshi's aide, who provided all kinds of support to her. Due to the hereditary nature of Seitenshi title, after the Defeat, in Tokyo area the position of her aide was the highest political post — the post held by that old man who was Tendo to the marrow of his bones.

Paying no attention to what this exited reporter was saying, Rentaro mumbled:

"No one ever realized a form of government without a ruling class."

"Is that so? By the way, it's time to go."

"Huh? Yeah."

The clock to the right and above the TV showed exactly that it was time. Being a mere student, Rentaro, an ordinary employee of Civil Security Company,

wasn't much into politics. To begin with, he didn't like any sorts of powerful people. He turned off the TV and urging Enju went outside.

"Now departing!"

Enju yelled cheerfully sitting on the bike rack with her legs stretched and holding on to Rentaro's waist. She called it the "Roman holiday pose".

The old bicycle received from their landlady was in terrible condition. The unoiled breaks gave out strident sounds upon touch, the spokes were covered with rust that seemed to start falling down if he started pedaling. It was an antique thing that kept him wondering how many years it stayed in a storage room.

But as soon as he started pedaling, these thoughts immediately disappeared.

Pedaling hard he was making his way through the pleasant and invigorating morning weather. Enju cheerfully greeted students and men in suits they occasionally passed by.

Looking upwards they could see Monoliths visible from great distance reflecting blinding sunlight.

Passing under the trees sparkling with morning dew, the sunbeams streaming through the leaves flickered like kaleidoscope.

It was a strange feeling.

Ten years ago, after the Gastrea invasion, the material civilization was in the abyss of collapse, a large number of people were either killed or turned into Gastrea. Back then people's faces were full of despair and pent-up venom. A mere ten years, but still ten years.

Deeply breathing in the smell of spring, Rentaro heard the departure bell of Tokyo tram service and felt nauseous.

When Enju, who pretended to be princess Ann, was about to yell that lousy line "Rome! By all means, Rome!", they reached Magata Elementary School that she attended.

"All right, I'll study hard. It's a brief separation, but don't cry when I'm not around," said Enju and manly shook his hand.

Surprised, Rentaro looked at the building of Magata High School standing nearby and let out a sigh.

"...Hey, Enju, don't you think it's quite an exaggeration since we'll be parted for just several hours?"

"I wish we could be together 24 hours a day. Rentaro, don't you wanna transfer to my class? Look, you aren't that bright minded, right? So just reenter the elementary school."

"...Don't say nonsense all of a sudden. And care for my pride."

"Um, well, in six years I'll be in second grade of high school. Stay in the same class until then. It's my last concession. Don't argue."

"It's kinda risky being a high school student when you are 23."

"I don't think so."

"But I do. I mean I'll be expelled for staying in the same class for so long."

"Grrr! *I want to be in the same class with you*!"

Seeing giggling girls passing by, she blushed and shrugged her shoulders.

"OK, I got it. By the way, while you are at school..."

Guessing what he was about to say, Enju shook her head and interrupted.

"I understand. I must be extremely careful so that no one in class knows that I'm one of the 'Cursed Children'."

Saying this, Enju showed her discolored cold pupils. Feeling awkward Rentaro averted his eyes.

"...I see, then it's fine..... Sorry."

"Ah, Enju, good morning!"

They heard a happy voice coming from the side. It was a girl with curly hair of about the same age as Enju.

"Good morning, Mai. I am glad to find you in good health."

"You speak weird as usual. By the way, have you seen Tenchuu Girls yesterday?"

"Of course!"

She was probably her classmate. When they started talking about some anime they no longer paid any attention to Rentaro or somebody else. Despite the fact that she instantly lost any interest in him, seeing as the two girls talked to each other, his face naturally broke into smile.

For a brief moment he felt stupid worrying about her school life.

"Enju, I'm off then."

Before she could say anything, he turned his back and got on the bicycle. He rode to the neighboring building of Magata High School and stopped his bicycle at the parking place. When he attached a u-lock, the school bell rang.

Rentaro clucked his tongue. *I'm late.*

Without any ambition he looked up at the school building. Half jokingly and half earnestly he thought about going back home, but then he shouldered his bag, hunched his back and slowly entered the building. A boring day has begun.

He slept through the whole Japanese class. During the math class he was called 3 times, but he ignored it and the teacher just gave up. During the break, their class representative, a shy little girl, timidly asked him to fill in the survey, since he was the only one who didn't do it already, but he ignored her and she left almost drawn to tears. One of the girls tried to stand up for her and said: "That was harsh, don't you think?" But Rentaro ignored her as well. "Idiot!" she said and joined the rest of the girls. He heard them saying: "Does he have any motivation? Why does he even come to school?"

Yawning, Rentaro looked through the window at the Monoliths rising in the distance.

Almost at the same time as the fourth class ended, the cellphone on his chest started vibrating.

Wondering who might call him at this hour, he rubbed his sleepy eyes and glanced at the phone display.

Sick of seeing the name of the caller he waited 10 more rings, but it kept vibrating, so he gave up and answered the call.

"Why are you calling... chief?"

"It's related to work. And don't call me chief when we're not at work."

He heard Kisara's clear voice on the other end of the line.

"Is this regarding yesterday's incident?"

"Yes. We'll talk about it in the car. We have to go to the Ministry of Defense."

"Huh?!"

He probably misheard her. *The Ministry of Defense... for real?*

"W-what are you talking about...?"

"Look out of the window."

With his back hunched he walked to the window and looked outside — a black limo was parked near the school gate. He unconsciously held his breath.

"Tch. I'll go when the classes are over."

"You fool. It's too late, turn around."

"Hm... Whoa!"

He involuntarily raised his pitiful voice and bent backwards. A beauty, whose sudden appearance might make a heart stop, was standing right behind him. His classmates were also startled by the sudden appearance of the person from another school.

"Well, let's go."

"But, but what about school?"

He stared up at Kisara, who put her hands on her waist.

"As for me, I skipped classes. What do you think is more important – school or work? And whose fault is that this month's salary is zero? *Yours*, you worthless idiot, Satomi."

Rentaro turned his eyes away from her.

"...Why on earth did you start to like the job so much?"

"Come on, let's go."

He was looking for a favorable opportunity to apologize for yesterday, but the timing wasn't right at all. *Uh, damn it.* Rentaro followed her keeping two steps behind. Everyone Kisara passed by stopped and turned around with a slightly opened mouth.

"Isn't it Miwa School uniform?" "No way. Miwa as in Miwa School that Seitenshi is enrolled in?" "It's the one that only rich girls can attend, and who is this beauty?" "This seems impossible, but it's true." "...Hey, who's the one following her?" "...Who knows, maybe her butler or someone like that?"

—— *I'm in the same class as you! Can't you at least remember my face?*

Rentaro gritted his teeth and kept following.

When they passed the school gate, Kisara got into the car—— not exactly, she just pretended to get into the car, instead she turned and gallantly walked past it.

"Hey... fake rich lady."

"Satomi, did you ever heard of limo service?"

"...OK, and why don't we ride it?"

"I can't pay for it."

"So you made a prank call, huh?"

"It's OK. I held my nose and gave a false name."

"No, no, that's fine by me——"

"——Look, Satomi, a stray chihuahua."

"Listen!"

Kisara started playing with the dog that rushed out. She sat down and patted the dog on the head, chihuahua started licking her hand and Kisara laughed as if someone tickled her.

When Rentaro looked at her face in profile, his heart began throbbing violently.

"Satomi, do you have something to feed him with?"

"Eh? ...Hm, actually I do. There are some stray dogs that come to our yard and Enju is eager to feed them."

"Here," Rentaro took out a bag of beef jerky from the back pocket and passed it to Kisara.

Her empty stomach rumbled. She gazed at the beef jerky for a second.

The next moment she vigorously snatched it out of his hand, turned her back and, of all things, ate it all with relish.

Rentaro froze with slightly opened mouth.

Poor chihuahua, who was robbed of the food a moment ago, cast an upward tearful glance.

After a while Kisara turned her red face towards Rentaro.

"What?! Wanna say something?"

"...Kisara, it was meant for the dog."

"I was a dog in a previous life!" she began saying something absurd.

"Kisara, shake."

She glared at Rentaro as if she wanted to kill him, but then she bit her lower lip and with deep red face placed her hand on top of his, and then she abruptly turned her face away.

It was humiliating, but why did she do it?

"Walk in a circle."

Kisara turned round and round.

It became quite funny.

"Beg."

"You are pervert!"

"Joking aside, Kisara, do you find such living painful?"

Kisara looked down feeling ashamed, she took out her worn-out purse and opened it.

When she looked inside, she got an urge to cover her eyes with her hands. *To think that she will come to this!*

"Listen... What if you stop attending your school where fees are really high and transfer to some public high school?"

"No. Attending Miwa High School is the only thing left of my Tendo pride. I'm paying the money that I earn from managing stocks and exchanges bought with my low monthly wages."

"But you don't like when you're called Tendo."

"The way other people look at me is another matter."

"Well... you might say so. Anyways, how do you intend to get to the Ministry of Defense with an empty wallet?"

She smiled charmingly.

"You've withdrawn money from an ATM two days ago, right?"

Rentaro turned his face away.

Chief is cadging money from me!

"You've withdrawn money from an ATM two days ago, right?"

".....I guess."

"You are such a good employee, you're strong and reliable!"

"Hm, I've got the feeling that you called me 'worthless', 'weak' and 'idiot'?"

"It was long ago, I already forgot it."

"No... It was yesterday."

"It was long ago, I already forgot it."

"OK, I'll put it on my expense account."

"I'll return it to you in the next life."

Rentaro was shocked to hear this from his chief. He let out a deep sigh.

"All right, all right. Let's go."

When he started walking, Kisara grabbed his sleeve and drooped her head. He looked at her with irritation:

"What now?"

"Um... Satomi... do you have any more beef jerky left?"

He gave her the last two pieces and she ate it right away.

Chihuahua gazed up at her looking betrayed.

"It's too late anyways, but is it OK that we didn't call Enju?"

After the delightful sound of departure bell the doors of the train closed. They were the only ones in the train car.

Kisara combed up her hair revealing the back of her neck and turned her gaze towards Rentaro.

"There won't be any fight of some sorts, but rather a discussion that will probably put her to sleep."

"Ah, I see."

Rentaro understood. *This will probably have something to do with the last incident. But why can't the government inform us with usual warning notes?*

"They haven't explained anything, they just told me that we have to come. I hate government officials. It looks as if they are telling the members of all Civil Security Companies who protect Tokyo Area: 'just be grateful that we give you a job'."

"Wouldn't it be better to decline the request?"

Kisara glanced at Rentaro's face and meaningfully shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't think so. For such weak and small company like ours, there's no other choice but to obey if they imply that we won't receive a job if we don't show up."

"So Civil Security Companies are government puppets...?"

"The government is very jealous. There is no theoretical limit to Initiator abilities. Top-class Initiators can maintain military balance in the whole world by themselves. That's why the government wants to keep all Civil Security Companies on a tether and manipulate them."

"How selfish... W-wait, so in a sense we're entering enemy territory?"

Kisara cast down her eyes and slightly shook her head.

"Gosh, you noticed it just now, huh? That's why I took you with me as a bodyguard. You are the only one whom I can count on, so, please, brace yourself."

Her last words echoed in Rentaro's head for some time and his heart slowly filled with deep emotions.

At that moment he felt startled by the gradually increasing soft weight on his shoulder. Kisara leaned her head against him. Her eyelids quivered heavily.

"Sorry... I'm feeling sleepy. Let me borrow your shoulder. I'm always feeling that way after eating. I can't sleep at school..."

"Can't? Why?"

"I am... Tendo. I am supposed to set an example. I can't let people see me like that."

Kisara became quiet. As she closed her eyes, the strength drained out of her body and the weight on Rentaro's shoulder increased. Apparently, she really fell asleep.

The train kept running producing a rhythmical pleasant sound. The light flowing from the window changed the shadows and illuminated Kisara's face.

Rentaro tilted his head very slowly and with extreme caution so that she won't wake up. His gaze accidentally fell on her bosom, which he would never dare to look straightly at under normal conditions.

He looked at her slim shoulders and at the line of her beautiful fully exposed collarbone. Her soft breasts that pushed up her sailor suit were slightly moving up and down within a hand's reach.

He gazed at her well-balanced face, her lips and long hair. Her sweet scent, that differed from a smell of shampoo or perfume, was intoxicating. His neck tingled every time her breathing reached it.

"She's beautiful", he thought honestly.

"Sato... mi."

He was about to answer her when he noticed that she was talking in her sleep. However, the next words that painfully came from her mouth cut him to the quick.

"Satomi... revenge me. Help... Kill... Tendo..."

"..... Yes."

Kisara knitted her brows, curled up and started shivering.

"Fa-ther, mother... No, don't die... Satomi... Help."

He put his arm around her shoulder and tightly embraced her without saying a word.

Part 4

The government building seemed deserted early in the afternoon.

At the entrance Rentaro and Kisara declared their names and were escorted inside. The elevator that gave an impression of cleanliness went up on high speed.

In front of a door with a sign "Conference Room №1" the person who escorted them made a slight bow and left.

When Rentaro opened the door for Kisara, he unconsciously raised his voice. The room behind the small door was spacious beyond imagination, a long table with elliptical shape was standing in the middle and a big EL panel was attached to the wall on the far side of the room.

What troubled him were the people in the room.

"Kisara, they are..."

"I sensed that we're not the only ones who were invited, but I had no idea there will be so many people from rival companies."

A number of people in well tailored suits, presumably the presidents of Civil Security Companies, were sitting around the table on their appointed seats. Behind them was a group of people who looked like nothing but ruffians. They were carrying black chrome weapons made of Varanium alloy. There was no doubt that they were Promoters like Rentaro. Initiators of the same age as Enju were standing beside them.

What is about to happen here?

The moment Rentaro stepped into the room, all these people stopped their idle chats and directed their malicious gazes towards him.

"Hey-hey, what the hell happened to the quality of Civil Security nowadays? Even little brats play it. Did you enter the wrong room? If you came here for an educational visit, then turn around and get out!"

One of the Promoters yelled and approached Rentaro.

He was wearing a tank top over his intimidating chest that looked like an iron plate. He had flame-colored hair standing on end, the lower part of his face was

covered with a skull-patterned scarf. The man was evaluating Rentaro with his narrow sanpaku eyes.

He was carrying a long broadsword, one might call a "bastard sword", that weighed over 10 kg. As expected its blade was black since it was made of Varanium. The sword was so large that Rentaro would've had problems even swinging it. Seeing how easily this guy handled the sword, it was obvious that he wasn't an ordinary person.

Rentaro mustered all his courage and came forward as if protecting Kisara. This action didn't please the big guy.

"Huh?"

"Who are you? If you need something, tell us your name first."

"What the hell is with that attitude? You seem weak."

"It's a bad idea to judge person's abilities by his looks, don't you think?"

"What the? You make me sick, I'll cut you into pieces, you hear me?!"

The intent on the man's face made Rentaro's legs shiver, the beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. *Damn, what such punks are doing here?*

He wasn't willing to start a quarrel. Trying to figure out where's the president of the Civil Security Company that this guy represented, he glanced over the room. A sudden dull punch in the face hurled Rentaro on his back. He quickly jumped to his feet holding one hand over his face.

After receiving such a fierce blow, Rentaro felt more surprise than pain. He took out his Springfield XD pistol from his belt.

"Fool, why are you getting so agitated? Or is it your way of greeting?"

The rest of the people in the room were unable to suppress a mocking laughter.

——*That bastard!*

"Satomi, we have no time to waste on a guy like that. Don't forget why we came here."

"Hey, what did you just say, bitch?!"

"Stop it, Syogen!"

The help came in the form of a man sitting at the table and leaning his elbows on it who seemed to be his employer.

"Are you joking, Mikajima?"

"That's enough. If there is any bloodshed in here, we're the ones who will get in trouble. If you can't comply with my orders, then get the hell out of here!"

In an instant Syogen became ominously quiet as if lost in thought. He cast a glance at Rentaro and backed off, mumbling: "Yeah, yeah."

Rentaro relaxed and breathed out.

This guy's employer came towards them with spread arms. It was an elite looking man in his mid thirties. He was wearing a Christian Dior suit and had a look of an intellectual.

"Please, forgive him. He's short tempered."

"You can't train your own dog, huh?"

The man wasn't a bit irritated by such sarcastic remark.

"No, no, I'm really sorry."

"...It's fine, he seems tamed."

That wasn't a lie. Many Promoters fought sticking to their own principles, but the truth is, there was also a great number of ruffians among them — some were just looking for a fight, some used this job as an invisible cloak to get away with crimes and so on.

That man turned his gaze towards Kisara.

"I am pleased to meet you, beautiful lady."

"Oh, you flatter me."

That man no longer had the slightest interest in them. Sheathed in expensive suit he was cool and imperturbable, but the atmosphere was somewhat tense.

Kisara smiled politely and hurriedly sat on a high chair.

"We have the farthest seats."

"It can't be helped. The truth is, we have the lowest rank here."

Upon closer look he realized that all the people, who were invited here, represented big companies and produced the impression of hotshots.

"So, why they invited such a weak company as ours?"

"I guess we'll know it soon."

Rentaro looked at the guys at the opposite side of the table whom they've met a moment ago and whispered into Kisara's ear.

"Who might they be?"

Still facing forward, Kisara passed him the business card that she received earlier.

The gold letters on watermarked background read: "Mikajima's Royal Guard, representative director Kagemochi Mikajima".

Rentaro moaned slightly. Even he knew that it was one of the biggest Civil Security companies. It employed a great number of skillful pairs.

"It means that this Promoter is an experienced swordsman."

"He was referred as Syogen earlier. Perhaps, he is Syogen Ikuma. His IP rank is 1584."

"A thousand...?!"

IP rank was set and published by the International Initiator Supervising Organization (IISO), it was based on the number of killed Gastrea and battle achievements. There was an issue of affinity between people, but the rank given by IISO was also considered as the strength benchmark.

Rentaro wiped off the sweat on the palms of his hands with his pants. There was no doubt that if he attacked that guy in hot blood earlier, he would've been beaten down to the ground without the least resistance.

"By the way, Satomi, do you remember yours and Enju's rank?"

"Not really... I guess it's around 120000."

"I don't remember it either, but you are probably right."

Kisara looked at his direction and sighed theatrically.

"What's more, they have much stronger pairs than that one. I wish we had such strong Promoters in our company. Though we have an excellent Initiator, our Promoter is a worthless idiot, he has lower rank than me and plus he's extremely weak."

Rentaro pretended not to hear this, but deep down he completely agreed with her.

The qualities of Initiators and Promoters directly affected the company's name recognition. In other words, a well known company is the one that employed a number of strong pairs. Enju was strong. If she had an appropriate Promoter, her rank would be around 1000. The reason why she couldn't get lower than the 120000 middle-zone mark was her incompetent partner.

The next moment a bald man dressed in a uniform entered the room.

All the presidents of Civil Security Companies, including Kisara, stood up from their seats. The bold man waved his hand urging them to sit down. He was far away, so Rentaro couldn't see his rank insignia, but he looked like a staff officer of Self-Defense Forces.

"There's only only one reason all of you were summoned today — we have a request to the Civil Security Companies who are present here. Think of it as a request from the government."

The bold man paused for a moment letting this thought soak in their minds and then looked out over the room.

"Hm, someone is absent?"

There was an empty chair six seats away from Rentaro with the triangular plate that read: "Oose's Future Corporation".

Rentaro met him once at the scene of an incident. The fat president of this company was usually followed by a lanky secretary who devotedly assisted him. For some reason these two looked like a comic duo. *Where are they today?*

"Before I explain any details, those who refuse to accept the request, please leave the room immediately. I want to warn you that you won't be able to decline the request once we announce the details."

Rentaro heaved a sigh inwardly. *How can a legally enforceable request differ from a daily job?*

The man surveyed the audience, but no one stood up, as expected.

More than thirty people including Kisara were sitting around the elliptic table. Coming here right from the school, Kisara was still wearing the school uniform and was looking weird among other people, but she didn't care at all.

Then there were Promoters standing behind their company presidents. They were wearing all sorts of clothes. For instance, there was a girl in a completely red rider suit with red hair, and then there was a tall man with bandaged face who looked like one of Giacometti's sculptures. Those people didn't have the slightest thought of dressing up before going to the government building.

One of them was Syogen Ikuma, leaning against the wall.

——*Huh*?

Rentaro noticed a young girl standing close to him.

She was wearing a long quiet-colored one-piece dress with long sleeves and spats. She had large bright eyes, but produced a somewhat cold atmosphere.

Syogen made a very strong impression, so Rentaro didn't noticed her earlier. Presumably she was his Initiator. The next moment their eyes met. Rentaro hurriedly diverted his gaze, but he realized that she kept staring in his direction. After a while he turned his eyes towards her - she was still looking at him.

Thinking of something, the girl kept staring at him with a sad look, holding hands to her stomach. At first he became worried that the girl might have an ache in her stomach, but then he realized that her subtle expression meant that she was hungry. For an Initiator of such a grim man like Syogen, she was quiet fascinating.

"Good, since no one left, let's begin."

To attract people's attention the bold man slowly looked at each and everyone and with the words: "This person will explain the details", stepped aside.

Suddenly the close-up image of a girl appeared on the EL panel behind him.

"Hello everyone, nice to see you."

Kisara opened her eyes widely and instantly stood up. Almost at the same time all the rest of the presidents also stood up flustered.

Rentaro stared at the panel and couldn't believe his eyes.

Snow-white garment and silver hair — Seitenshi, the ruler of the Tokyo Area after the Defeat.

Kikunojyo Tendo, who followed her like a shadow, stood at a reasonable distance from her. They broadcast from a western-style room. For a brief moment Kisara's and Kikunojyo's eyes met and produced a spark. Knowing the true relations between the two, Rentaro became petrified with fear.

Seitenshi was sitting on an Art Nouveau chair of delicate workmanship; an expensive painting and a canopy bed were visible behind her. *So that's how a room of a girl living in Seikyo looks like.*

Rentaro felt a strange anxiety because of a sudden appearance of the authority. His intuition told him that they are about to get involved in something terrible.

"Please, make yourself comfortable. I'll explain the details."

Not a single person took their seat.

"The request is quiet simple. First of all we need you to find the Gastrea that invaded Tokyo Area yesterday and infected a man, and to eliminate it. One more thing — you need to recover a case that we assume is inside that Gastrea and retrieve it intact."

——*A case?*

Another window popped up on the EL panel showing the photo of duralumin suit case. The numbers shown to the side of the photo denoted the reward. The sum of money granted for finding this case caused an aura of bewilderment in the air.

Mikajima raised his hand.

"May I ask you a question? You assume that the case was either swallowed by that Gastrea or that it entered the Gastrea's body during the 'shape collapse'?"

"That's right."

The moment a victim started to turn into Gastrea, his clothes, epidermis and all the things he had with himself, would adhere to the skin and body parts of newly born Gastrea. This phenomenon was called "shape collapse". That meant that there was no way to retrieve the case without killing that Gastrea.

"Does the government has any information regarding the form and the type of the said Gastrea and where it might be currently hiding?"

"Unfortunately, we don't have such information."

This time Kisara raised her hand.

"May I ask what is inside that case that we need to recover?"

The presidents of all security companies became excited. Unintentionally Kisara became a voice of everyone present in the room.

"Oh, and who are you?"

"Kisara Tendo."

Seitenshi looked a little surprised.

"...I've heard about you. Anyway, it's a curious question, president of Tendo Civil Security. But I can't answer it, because I can't violate the privacy of the requester."

"I can't accept that. Since the Gastrea that is the source of infection has the same genotype as the infected victim, then that Gastrea should also be the spider type. Our Promoter can handle an enemy of that level by himself."

Saying that, Kisara nervously looked at Rentaro and added: "I guess..."

What an impolite chief she was.

Kisara continued:

"The question is — why such simple request comes with such huge reward—— Furthermore, I can't understand why you had to call the top class Civil Security. Isn't it obvious that we will suspect there is something dangerous inside that case that can justify such an enormous reward?"

"This is not something you need to know, don't you think?"

"Maybe. But if you intend to conceal this information to the bitter end, then our company has to decline this request."

"...In that case you'll receive a penalty."

"I'm ready for that. With such vague explanation I can't put our employees in danger."

During the terrifying silence that reigned in the room, Rentaro was the only one who was puzzled. In the train Kisara told him that she won't decline a request from the government...

When he opened his mouth and was about to say something, a very loud laugh echoed throughout the room.

"Who is it?"

"It's me."

Everyone including Rentaro turned towards the owner of this voice. They were shocked.

A mysterious man in mask wearing a tailcoat and a silk hat was sitting on a chair of the president of Oose Corporation, that was empty until now, with his legs stretched on the table.

The presidents sitting near that man screamed and fell out of their chairs startled by the sudden appearance of the masked man.

I know him. Not only that——

"You... fool."

Exclaiming: "Hey", the man bent backwards, sprang to his feet and climbed onto the table. The presidents watched him speechlessly.

When he reached the center of the table, he stopped and turned directly towards Seitenshi.

"...Identify yourself."

"I apologize."

The man took off his hat and made a low bow.

"My name is Kagetane Hiruko. Pleased to meet you, useless country ruler. Frankly speaking, I am your enemy."

A chill ran down Rentaro's back, he drew his pistol.

"Y-you..."

The man furiously turned towards Rentaro.

"Hahaha, how are you, Satomi? My new friend."

"Where did you come from?!"

"Hahaha. To put it simply I came right through the front door. But I had to kill some people because they were annoying like flies. Ah, yes! It's a perfect time to introduce my Initiator. Kohina, come here."

"Yes, papa."

A girl came out from behind Rentaro and Kisara and walked past them. The hair on the back of Rentaro's neck stood up. *How long had she stayed behind us?*

She had a short wavy hair and was wearing a black frilled one-piece dress. Two crossed scabbards, that probably contained short swords, were visible behind her back.

"Ugh," with some effort she clambered up the table. She stood near Kagetane, pinched the hem of her skirt and made a curtsy.

"Kohina Hiruko, 10 years old."

"She is my Initiator and my daughter."

——*Initiator? This man is Civil Security?!'*

Kohina turned her head left and right and looked out over the room, after some time she humbly pulled the hem of Kagetane's tailcoat.

"Papa, everyone looks at us. It's embarrassing. Can I cut them? Or can I cut just the one who points a gun at us?"

"Alright, alright. But it's not the time yet. Be patient."

"But... papa."

When Rentaro noticed the blood dripping from the mouth of the scabbards behind the girl's back, he felt shivers down his spine. Still aiming his gun with one hand, with the other one he urged Kisara to move behind him.

"What do you want?"

"I'm here to give you my greetings. I want to inform everyone that I will also enter this race."

"Enter? What do you mean?"

"What I'm saying is that I will obtain the 'Legacy of Seven Stars'."

When Seitenshi heard this, she tightly shut her eyes for a moment, as if reconciling herself to this situation.

"Legacy of Seven Stars? What is it?"

"Oh my, you really were forced to accepted this request without knowing anything? Poor things. It's what inside this duralumin case you were talking about."

"So, yesterday, when you were in that room——"

"Exactly. I was chasing that Gastrea and entered the room, but then it vanished. While I was lingering there, the police officers broke the window and rushed into the room. I was surprised, so I killed them. Hihihi!"

Kagetane laughed hard holding the mask with his hand. Rentaro felt hatred.

"Bastard..."

Kagetane widely spread his arms and rotated on top of the table.

"Gentlemen, let's set the rules. The rules of the game of who, me or you, will find that Gastrea and obtain the Legacy of Seven Stars. Since it might be inside the Gastrea, you must kill it to retrieve the case. How about you bet your lives?"

"——I've been listening quietly to your tedious speech."

A subdued voice came from the far side of the room.

It was a man with a face scarf, carrying a bastard sword, — Syogen Ikuma.

"But you are too noisy. To be brief, I think you should die right here."

It seemed that Syogen vanished, but the next moment he appeared near Kagetane moving towards him. ——*He is fast.*

"I'll cut you in pieces!"

"Oh?"

He swung his sword like a tornado producing the surging gust of wind. He had a perfect timing and distance to make the deathblow that the enemy couldn't escape.

However, a moment later everyone heard a thunderclap-like sound and watched Syogen's sword bouncing back and flying off in the opposite direction.

"Wha——"

"How unfortunate."

What just happened?

It was just a mere second, but Rentaro saw a white pale light appeared between Kagetane and Syogen.

"Syogen, get back!"

Hearing Mikajima's yell, Syogen instantly realized what's about to happen and retreated.

As if timing it, the presidents of all Civil Securities, as well as Promoters, drew their self-defense weapons and all at once started firing. Rentaro also fired. Kisara, who stood nearby, fired too.

With a deafening sound of gun shots the bullets flew towards that man from all directions. A second thunderclap and this time everyone was able to see the pale white light.

A dome-shaped barrier.

When the bullets hit that barrier, they bounced back with a loud bang. Along with the sound of bullets breaking the glassware and paintings, someone's war cry was heard.

Rentaro was firing his pistol like a mad man, but soon he ran out of bullets; all the people around also kept firing until their cartridges became empty.

The room plunged into an odd silence, a strong scent of gunpowder smoke was floating in the air. Rentaro heard the voices of those who were unfortunate to be wounded by a ricochet.

"How..."

Feeling as if it was something out of this world, Rentaro swallowed hard.

Standing on the table riddled with bullets the masked man and the girl looked down over the room. All these high ranked people present in the room kept still as if paralyzed.

Looking calm and serene, Kagetane spread his arms.

"This is my repulsion field. I'm called 'Imaginary Gimmick'."

"...A barrier? Are you really a human?"

"I am. However, to make *this* possible I had to replace most of my internal organs with Varanium machines."

"Machines...?"

"Satomi, let me introduce myself. I am Kagetane Hiruko, the former member of the mechanized special unit №787 'New Human Creation Plan' of the Eastern Corps of the Ground Self-Defense Forces."

Mikajima widely opened his eyes in surprise.

"...The special forces that were used to fight Gastrea that started the war? You mean, they really do exist...?"

"It's your choice to believe it or not. Hm, you know what, Satomi? Back then I wasn't earnest with you after all. I'm sorry."

Kagetane approached Rentaro quietly. Like a magician he placed a white cloth on the palm of his hand, counted to 3 and removed it. A box with a ribbon appeared on his hand. He placed the box on the table and put his hand on Rentaro's shoulder who became frightened to death.

"It's a present for you. Well, we must be leaving now. You should give up your hope, members of Civil Securities. The day of total destruction is near. Let's go, Kohina."

"Yes, papa."

With an air of perfect composure the two walked to the window, broke it and very naturally jumped down.

For some time no one in the room including Rentaro moved. Not a single person proposed an idea to pursue them.

It was the first time Rentaro realized that a person can kill with a mere look. He struggled to hold back the vomit that was gradually rising up in his stomach.

Suddenly someone put a hand on Rentaro's shoulder and he gave a start. He turned around and saw Kisara's furious face.

"Satomi, explain where did you meet that man?"

"That is..."

While Rentaro hesitated what to say, Mikajima angrily slammed the desk with his fist.

"Tendo, your excellency! The 'New Human Creation Plan'—— Is it true what that man said?"

"I don't need to answer that."

Kikunojyo replied immediately, firm as a huge rock.

A heavy silence settled in the air, but not for long — a man burst into the room like mad.

"Help! The president... Aaaaa!"

That screaming man was the lanky secretary of the currently absent president of Oose Corporation. He was breathing heavily with his whole body and his eyes started out of their sockets — he seemed mentally confused.

"The president was murdered in his home! His head is nowhere to be found."

Everyone turned their gazes towards the box lying beside Rentaro.

The box was about 30 cm in diameter. Rentaro slowly untied the ribbon with shaking hands and opened the lid.

——He gazed at its contents for a moment, then slowly closed the lid.

Rentaro met him only few times in the field, but among all these violent-looking members of Civil Securities this man had a constant smile on his face, so Rentaro secretly admired him.

He shook his clenched fist, and an inexpressible anger arose in him.

"... That bastard!"

"Silence!"

Upon hearing Seitenshi's serene voice, still in rage Rentaro slowly raised his head.

"The situation became unusual. Gentlemen, I must add a new condition for completing this request. You must retrieve the case before that man. Otherwise a terrible thing will happen."

Kisara fiercely stared at Seitenshi.

"Can you explain now what is inside that case?"

"All right. It contains the 'Legacy of Seven Stars'. If this object falls into the wrong hands, it can cause the destruction of the Monoliths and the 'Total Annihilation' of Tokyo Area."

BLACK BULLET CHAPTER 02

第二章
呪われた子供たち

Chapter 02 - The Cursed Children

Part 1

The morning sun shone through the clouds and rained down on the land in stripes, and the chirping sparrows were frolicking on the branch.

There were 8 young boys and girls gathered at the empty space behind the apartment Rentaro's group were staying at. Their eyes were dazzling as they looked up at him. He felt that he had met them before somewhere, only to realize that they were all Enju's classmates.

Rentaro resisted the urge to yawn as he stood on the empty land blankly with his messy bedhair. This awkward atmosphere caused him to sway slightly, and his stare was drifting swimmingly nowhere.

"What? You mean you want me to be your master?"

""""YES~!!!""""

The children answered loudly with such intensity that it could overwhelm Rentaro, and he ignored them for the time being as he glanced sidelong at Enju in a frustrated manner whilst the latter remained unable to hide her gleeful expression.

"Oi, Enju…I hope these brats can go home quietly for now. What do you say I should do?"

"Isn't it okay? Just give them a few lessons."

Rentaro sighed with a disheartened look. It seemed that this was a result of Enju boasting at school that Rentaro was some sort of 'Martial Arts expert'.

Because of this, he was woken up early in the morning, and the morning of this rare off-day was wasted as a result. Normally, Rentaro would be nestled in his futon, rolling about in his sleep.

"Master, is it true you could scare a brown bear to death with a glare?"

And the rumors have been exaggerated to such an extent.

"Master, is it true that you could destroy a marine battalion bare-handed?"

It seemed he had killed a marine squad before.

"Master, is it true that you can catch a nuclear warhead and throw it back?"

Rentaro gave a chiding look to Enju. *How much did you boast exactly?*

Once their eyes met, Enju gave him a thumbs up, 'you can do it, Rentaro' and it seemed she really had confidence in Rentaro when she showed this expression.

Rentaro really wanted to sigh. Enju's bad habit was that she believed that he could do anything if he really got serious.

He scratched his head hard. Any person had gone through a time where they thought they were some superhero with special powers, and Rentaro too did not deny that he wanted to protect the dreams of these innocent children.

Mentally prepared, he nodded. It was important to give a good first impression.

Besides, dealing with kids was nothing to him.

"Oi, so you guys are gathered here? I'm the Rentaro Satomi they talk about!"

Silence.

At this point, he was at a loss of what to do, and he turned over to Enju, pleading for help.

However, Enju waved at Rentaro with a gleeful expression. It seemed she did not understand Rentaro's intent at all.

"Then, listen up. The original Tendo style concept is established by the first practitioner of the Tendo style—Sukekiyo Tendo. Simply put, the Tendo fighting style is based on one type of punches, and two types of kicks, so there are 3 types in all. Sorry that I won't be able to meet your expectations however. I'm still a beginner, so the number of moves I know are limited, and for someone of my level, there are still skills I still haven't learned—"

"—Master, those don't matter. Please hurry and teach us a super move."

"Tch, can't be helped then."

Rentaro was frustrated by how energetic the kids were, and walked to the Maple tree on the empty land.

He lowered his center of gravity, showed off the basic 'Hundred Infinite Stance', and took a deep breath.

“Tendo Style Martial Arts, Type 1, Number 3—”

He quickly exhaled, spun around, and punched in the midst of his momentum.

“—‘Rokuro Kabuto!”.

The punch hit the target, ‘THUNK!’ and with a blunt impact, the Maple Tree swayed greatly, and the leaves fell.

Rentaro exhaled, relaxed himself, and turned towards them expressionlessly.

“H-How about it?”

“Eh—it’s too fast. I can’t see!” “It’s just a simple punch!” “…Isn’t that too dull?” “Right?” “Why didn’t you break the tree~” “I want my money back~”

Rentaro clutched his head in frustration. What do I do? I want to beat them all up!!

“Eh, don’t be so hasty. That was just a warm-up. There’s still a secret skill I have. One of the Ultimate moves in the Tendo Style Martial Arts. Type 2, Number 11, “Concealed Zen, Weeping Water”.”

“Ohh~” “Sounds cool.” “It’s just the name that’s cool though?” “How do you know without seeing?”

Rentaro told himself that he had to succeed as he faced the large tree, gathered enough momentum to kick the tree trunk down, and jumped high.

“Tendo Style Martial Arts. Type 2, Number 11—”

At that instance, Rentaro’s mind recalled the incident that happened in the conference room the previous day.

The term Kagetane spoke of continued to swirl in Rentaro’s mind.

—“New Human Creation Plan”.

…That guy?

Seitenshi said this previously, *“As everyone knows, currently, the Tokyo Area is protected by the Monolith barriers. I shall abstain from the details for the time being, but if anyone intends to use the Inheritance of the 7 stars for malevolent purposes, it can open a huge hole in a corner of the monoliths. With that, the storm of death shall invade the Tokyo Area. The situation is critical, and every*

second counts. Everyone, please take back the Inheritance of the 7 Stars whatever the means."

Rentaro narrowed his eyes slightly.

I mustn't lose to that guy—Kagetane Hiruko no matter what.

Rentaro narrowed his eyes slightly.

He gathered strength in his lower abdomen, and glared at the tree.

"Here I go. Secret Art—"

At that moment, from a corner of his eyes, Rentaro noticed a boy who seemed uninterested as he played with a soccer ball, and proceeded to kick the ball at Rentaro.

"Wah!"

Rentaro, whose attack was interrupted so easily once he was attacked, and his momentum caused him to fall headfirst into the canal. Laughter exploded around him.

Enju was pressing her temples with her hands, giving an embarrassed expression as she shook her head.

"This is really stupid. That kind of useless attack can't even kill any trash bug."

Trash bug…

"Never mind them. Let's go back and play the Playstation, shall we?"

"""""Agreed~"""""

"O-oi, you guys, hold on—"

Rentaro's plea to stop them fell on deaf ears, and Enju's classmates broke off in order. Afterwards, Rentaro and Enju were left behind, and a short moment later, Enju stamped on the ground angrily.

"Muu~ come back!! Rentaro's really amazing! He's also amazing at night too!"

"S-Spare me the agony…"

Rentaro checked the time, and found that it was still morning. However, he was not in the mood to head back to sleep.

“Enju, is there anywhere else you want to go to?”

Enju’s face immediately brightened, and she leapt about, jumping for joy.

“Shopping!”

“Right right, I get it.”

After getting off the cramped train filled with the stench of sweat, Rentaro was dragged by the impatient Enju to the toy store. This toy store was very large, and took up the space of an entire level in a large electronics department store.

As it was a holiday, there were many people moving about, and some came here in families.

As he looked at the children standing in the middle of their parents, holding their hands and asking to be pampered, Rentaro wondered what others would see him and Enju.

Rentaro picked up the block-type jigsaw puzzle sample; this feeling still remained in his memories, and a sense of nostalgia rose in his heart.

“It’s a long time ago, but Kisara and I played with this before. I didn’t expect you to like this though.”

“This is what I want!”

Once Enju said that, she pointed at the anime goods corner in the IMOD area.

The name written in pop-up words was “Tenchu Girls Corner”. Speaking of which, it seemed Enju was talking about this anime with her classmates the previous day.

“What is this anime about?”

Rentaro was not interested in it despite asking, and he soon regretted his action. Enju’s eyes dazzled “You wanna know?” as she looked up at him.

To summarize what Enju said delightedly, in a quest to take revenge for the murder of her foster father Asano, a girl called Yoshiko Ooishikura Ranosuke

(magical girl) gathered 46 warriors in the entire counter (magical girl) to attack the Kira residence. It seemed to be some expansive epic anime.

It seemed the 'Moe Ako Warriors' were the latest trend.

"…It's a magical girl anime, and it became some story of revenge in the end?"

"Fufu, that's what makes it interesting, right?"

"I-Is that so…?"

Rentaro glanced at the sword that was placed in the special corner. It was a sharp Japanese with a silver-like glare, but only the hilt was redesigned as a magical stick. It seemed this thing was called a stickblade. Rentaro again stared at the promotional movie, "DDIIIIEEEEEE!!!" and saw the heroine, the Tenchu Red let out a blood-curdling scream as she swung the extremely long sword, and the savage look on her face was given a close-up.

It really was unknown what demographic this show was targeted at, and there was no use of magic at all.

Upon seeing the stickblade and the magical girl costume that were placed at the most obvious of places, Rentaro could only groan at the exorbitantly high prices.

"…Why is it so expensive."

"Expensive? Isn't it normal? I'll buy this using my own salary, so you don't have to worry about your wallet, 'kay?"

After leaving these words behind, Enju started eyeing at the goods that filled her sights.

"How about this?"

Soon after, Enju brought a bracelet as she returned to Rentaro. It had patterns made of chrome plating on it, and as it was possibly made of aluminium, it felt exceptionally light.

"What is this?"

"The bracelet the tenchu girls wear. This is the proof to identify the 47 warriors, and if there is anyone lying to their allies, this bracelet will show cracks, and reveal who is not being honest amongst them."

"Oh, it feels somewhat like the 'broken mirror'."

"What is this 'Broken Mirror'?"

Rentaro drew some kanjis in the air for Enju to see.

"I heard from my teacher before that there was a couple who went on separate ways. They took a mirror, divided it in half, and took a piece each as proof when they reunite. However, the wife broke the agreement and had an affair. At this moment, the mirror broke on its own, became a bird, and returned to the wife, causing both of them to break up. It's this kind of story—now then, young Aihara, what kind of lesson have you learned from this story?"

"Right, teacher. If you want to steal, don't get caught."

"Ehh?"

Enju placed a hand under her chin.

"But it really seems similar. That broken mirror or something probably copied the Tenchu Girls concept."

"…This isn't a case of who copies who. Speaking of which, how much does this cost anyway?"

"6980 Yen. It's really cheap!"

"IT'S DARN EXPENSIVE! THAT'S 2 MONTHS OF OUR RATIONS FEES!!"

Before Rentaro could even stop her, Enju had already ran all the way to the counter and complete the transaction.

"Here, put it on too, Rentaro."

"Wait, me too?"

"This comes in a pair. If Rentaro doesn't put it on with me, who am I going to give it to?"

Upon seeing Enju put that gimmick on her right hand, Rentaro too got ready to put it on his right hand, but quickly decided to put it on his left instead.

With a beaming look on her face, Enju stared at Rentaro.

“W-what is it?”

“This is like a package for couples, and now Rentaro can’t lie to me or try to bluff me anymore, and Rentaro can’t have affairs with other women too. The bracelet will break apart if you peek at Kisara’s breasts for example.”

“Ehh—I, Rentaro Satomi, deeply loves Enju Aihara…it didn’t break.”

“That’s because it’s the truth.”

“Damn, there’s such an excuse too? I never thought about that.”

Both of them chatted as they held hands and walked out of the department store. The main aim actually was for Enju to speak up, and Rentaro was to answer at times. However, it seemed talking with Enju like this was a viable way to ease his melancholy from the previous day.

Upon seeing the figure of Seitenshi on the street television panel, he stopped in his track.

It seemed to be a news recording. Unlike previously, Seitenshi’s expression was extremely serious, and she was describing the proposal for a law to respect the basic human rights the “Cursed Children” had. This was the “Gastrea New Law” that was currently hotly debated.

Could that law really pass through?

Rentaro really hoped that it could, and held onto Enju’s hand tightly.

Not too long ago, the “Cursed Children” would normally be born secretly at the riverside and drowned to death before their eyes could even open. Also, due to their exceptional regenerative abilities, they were easily mistreated and abused cruelly by their parents.

It was said they, inflicted with the trauma, upon seeing the red eyes, would trigger a post-war traumatic stress disorder—the Gastrea Shock, and could not look at their children straight in the eyes as a result.

Also, because the hereditary genes were infected and mutated by the Gastrea Virus, they would be unable to prove the parent-child relationship even if they want to. Some even brazenly doubted if they should be legally considered human.

The “Robbed Generation” that had gone through the Great War were practically discriminatory parties who latently despise the “Cursed Children”. In this situation, there were few that would stand on their side.

To be honest, Rentaro did not feel this was a problem a person could solve alone. He was certainly welcoming of the notion that the Higher Management of the Tokyo Area was willing to understand their plight, or rather, he even thought of leaving this troublesome matter for Seitenshi to handle—

“It hurts, Rentaro. Let go.”

Rentaro immediately let go of her hand. At this moment, he saw that the news topic had changed, and Enju looked up at him doubtfully.

“…Sorry, I was thinking about something. Let’s go.”

Just when he was about to turn away, he spotted a human wall on the other side of the road. He was feeling curious, and at that moment, there was a growl that ostensibly came from below the ground, and there was killing intent dissipated from what resembled onlookers.

He did not know the reason, but the annoying premonition caused him to remain rooted.

Rentaro, whose athletic abilities and gunmanship were ordinary, could remain as a member of Civil Security simply because of his precise instincts. It was telling him to quickly get away.

“Enju, let’s go back from the other way—”

“—CAPTURE IT!”

A shriek-like scream rang, and a girl broke out from the human wall practically at that moment. She was holding onto a supermarket basket with a logo belonging to a large company, filled completely with food. Rentaro had been there to shop before.

Upon seeing Enju and Rentaro in her way, the girl immediately stopped in her tracks as she was taken aback. Rentaro too remained rooted, unable to move.

The girl’s clothing consisted of a leather belt around her denim skirt and a white tunic, but like her black-ridden face, it was unknown when was the last time she washed her clothing, and there were patches everywhere. Like the food in her clutches, these clothes were most probably stolen.

Anyone could tell on first glance that she was a child living in the "Outer Area". Also, the eyes reflecting the image of Rentaro and Enju were wine red. She was one of the Cursed Children, just like Enju.

Numerous hands reached out from behind, interrupted the elongated stare between them. The large adults grabbed her by the back, threw her down violently, and even Rentaro could clearly hear the sound of the bones creaking. The vegetables and fruits rolled out from the basket and rolled towards his feet.

"LET GO!"

The girl's face was stuck onto the asphalt, and the pretty face was distorted as she bared her teeth and flailed her hands about like a wild tiger. However, nobody in the crowd showed any pity to her.

"You scum, you all are the trash of Tokyo area" "Nice work! This damned Gastrea." "Stop howling away, you killing monster." "If you "Red Eyes" never killed all my relatives in the first place…" "You dead meat, "Red Eyes"!"

Rentaro walked over and patted a certain person on the shoulder.

"Oi, what's with her…"

"What do you mean? This brat stole something, and when a guard called out to her, she beat him up to near death!"

Rentaro stared over at Enju's face, and as expected, her face was pale as she shuddered.

At this moment, that unknown girl too stared at Enju.

Once the "Cursed Children" hide their red eyes, their appearances would be no different from that of an ordinary child. Thus, even if she stared at Enju, she probably would not be able to realize that Enju was someone similar. For some reason, she continued to reach her free hand out to Enju, pleading for help.

Rentaro quickly waved her hand away, and glared at her.

Stop it. Don't get Enju involved.

Upon seeing Rentaro's expression, the girl showed an obvious terrified expression.

"What are you gathered here for!?"

At this moment, two policemen whisked the onlookers away to clear up the mess. One of them was a skinny bespectacled man, while the partner was a bald man with a hulking figure.

Rentaro could not help but secretly heave a sigh of relief once he saw that this mass lynching was finally at its end.

However, the bespectacled policeman gave a few glances at the crowd, which had quiet down, and the girl who was held down. it seemed he understood the entire situation, “Ah”, and coldly remarked.

The policemen forced the girl to get up, and without asking the passersby about the specifics, lashed handcuffs on her.

The bespectacled man ignored the befuddled Rentaro, thanked the crowd as a representative, and whisked the girl into the police car. Did that policeman really ascertain what crime the girl made?

After the girl was taken away, there was murmuring amidst the crowd as it dissipated.

All these happened in such a short time, and in the end, only Rentaro and Enju were left.

I have no choice. There was nothing I could have done.

Rentaro felt guilt in his heart, and as he glanced aside to Enju while intending to pull her home, he was shocked by her. Enju’s fists were tightly clenched as she glared angrily at Rentaro,

“Why didn’t Rentaro do anything back then!?”

Enju’s eyes were bright red, and Rentaro was overwhelmed by her presence. The crowd, which was slowing breaking away, turned back to show skeptical looks at them. He kept any faltering within him hidden “It’s none of your business.” as he called out to the onlookers.

He grabbed Enju by the hand and walked to an alley between the buildings. The exhaust pipes let out a nauseating stench.

“I had no choice, Enju. If you’re exposed in that situation as well, you’ll definitely be lynched there.”

“But Rentaro shook off that outstretched hand pleading for our help!”

"I can't do everything! She did something wrong too! No matter how bad the living conditions in the outer area is, she can't just steal things here!"

Rentaro could not stop himself from lecturing her, even though he clearly knew that such a reply would only add on to Enju's anger.

She shook her head vehemently.

"THAT'S JUST AN EXCUSE! RENTARO COULD HAVE DONE SOMETHING IF RENTARO WANTS TO HELP HER. RENTARO'S AN ALLY OF JUSTICE. THERE'S NOTHING RENTARO CAN'T DO!"

"Don't push your immature illusions on me! I can't do anything…nothing at all."

As Rentaro was in the middle of his sentence, he suddenly recovered and spotted Enju holding in her sniffles as she sobbed. He reached out to her shoulder, but she took a step back.

"…Enju, just maybe…you know that girl?"

Rentaro was not really certain of this, but Enju really bawled her heart out as she nodded.

"When I was living in the Outer Area, I met her several times. We never talked to each other, but I think she remembered me."

"Is that so…b-but I just waved her off because the atmosphere was tense back then. I didn't think too much…"

Rentaro could no longer look right into Enju's eyes as he said this. His conscience was berating him, and soon after, he made his decision.

"Enju, can you go back alone?"

"Eh?"

Before he realized it, Rentaro's legs were moving on their own. He dashed out of the alley, looked around, and found a youth riding on a scooter, waiting for the green light. He patted the youth on the shoulder, and without waiting for a response, immediately showed his Civil Security pass,

"Civil Security. There's a Gastrea in this area. I'm taking your scooter."

“H-hey, wait, what’re you blabbering about?”

“Looking at your physique, I’m guessing you’re a Middle Schooler. You don’t want things to get out of hand here, right?”

Rentaro watched the tentative youth as he got the permit, and then snatched the scooter violently. The engine let out a deep buzzing as the vehicle spun towards the opposite direction, and went off to where the police car was just headed.

Rentaro was not only without a helmet, but also flagrantly ignoring the traffic rules. In fact, even if he was stopped, the other party would understand the situation once he shows his Civil Security pass. However, that would take too much time.

Rentaro swerved about dangerously between the vehicles, but a tension completely unrelated to the potential of an accident caused his heart to race.

Why did the policemen whisk the girl away without asking her or the victim? What did this unorthodox method mean?

There was nary a small police post, let alone a major police station, in the direction Rentaro was driving. If he continued on, it would simply be the Outer Area.

Rentaro started pleading to the god he did not believe in, and hoped he was simply overly worried.

Just when he was thinking about this, the monoliths far away that seemed small on first glance continued to expand in his sights. He could see the wreckage of several broken and abandoned buildings around him. This was the Outer Area—the shadow to the bustling Tokyo Area.

Rentaro thought that the policemen would simply pass by, but found a police car parked at the base of a tower twisted in the middle.

He pressed on the brakes lightly 30m away to avoid making loud noises, parked the light scooter at what seemed to be a derelict gas station, and cautiously approached.

At this moment, Rentaro himself was not sure about why he was sneaking about, but he was more confident about believing in his instincts more than his doubts.

He went around the abandoned building and approached the police car. On his way there, he spotted the ground floor of a certain building, stripped bare to its frame, the concrete within completely worn away, and the dangling wallpapers and pipes made it resemble a haunted house. After touching a few times, something similar to concrete dust fell off. Nobody would believe that this was abandoned for only 10 years.

The surroundings were eerily quiet, and there wasn't a person in sight within the vicinity.

Rentaro turned around the corner, approached the patrol car, and peeked inside. As expected, the girl and the policemen were not in the car. Just when he felt a little frustrated for secretly sighing, he looked at the radio tower, and then proceeded over there.

He passed through a damaged metal fence, only to suddenly hear a sound, and he hurriedly hid behind a wall.

He stealthily turned his head over around, peeked out from the corner, and found the skinny man and bald policeman standing with their backs facing him. The girl was not too far away, her back leaning at the wall.

It was unknown if the girl was mentally prepared, or whether she was unsure of what outcome awaited her as she continued to shudder, her face deathly pale.

The two policemen facing away from him remained silent, and the precarious atmosphere caused Rentaro to hold his breath.

Just as he frowned, wondering what would happen next, a gunshot suddenly rang.

The girl, standing near them, fell on her knees as blood spurted out from her hand. She slowly reached her hand, touched her head, stared at the blood gushing out from the wound, and seemed to be trying to her best to comprehend what just happened.

Bullets then rained on her, tearing holes through her abdomen, chest and limbs. Her body was ostensibly electrocuted, and after a massive tumble, crashed into the metal fence behind.

"Damn it. She's still alive!"

The skinny bespectacled man approached her and fired 3 shots at the head. The girl fell forward, and as a large amount of blood spread on the floor, she was finally immobilized.

Rentaro covered his mouth with his hands, and swallowed the wail he nearly let out.

After some cussing, the policemen looked around for a while, and made a quick getaway from the scene.

Rentaro moved his trembling legs to the door, knelt down and used his hands to support himself off the ground.

DAMN IT. Rentaro exclaimed in his heart spitefully.

Without entertaining the concern that his clothes might get dirty, he held the girl tightly in his arms. He felt the body cool down due to the loss of blood, and rage surged in his heart.

Isn't Civil Security supposed to do the noble job of protecting the innocent citizens and maintaining justice?

Protect innocent citizens? An ally of justice? Damn it! I just stood by and watch a kid get killed here!

What's right, and what's wrong? And what is the enemy I should beat exactly—

Unable to vent his frustrations, Rentaro shook his head as the chaotic thoughts filled it.

At this moment, the girl in his clutches coughed, and spat out blood.

Rentaro's mouth was slightly ajar. She was alive; there might be a chance to save her.

Before he realized it, Rentaro was carrying her in his arms, running off.

It was past 2am.

Unlike the warmth during the day, the night still had traces of spring cold, and Rentaro staggered his way home. He did not understand if it was out of fatigue, but the unbearable thirst and headache continued to strike him. Too many things happened that day, and it was probably an aftereffect.

Thinking back, he was riding on a light scooter while holding a girl, weighing more than 30kg, in one hand, and the hard work was not something that could be simply waved off. However, he did not find the girl overly heavy, perhaps because it was a life-and-death situation; this was probably similar to an adrenaline boost in the midst of a fire.

Upon reaching the hospital, the girl was immediately ushered in by the doctor in the emergency room.

In the midst of operation, Rentaro sat on the corridor bench, and took all sorts of questions from another doctor. He was vexed by the doctor's expression when the latter learnt that the girl was a migrant from the Outer Area, with nowhere to go.

The orphans in the Outer Area were not under census, let alone registered with healthcare insurance. The hospital would not be able to get operation fees for such people, and would have to bear the full cost.

If Rentaro had not stated that he was willing to pay, the hospital might have uttered a laughable lie — "the surgeon is not in" that could have been seen through easily.

After a long 8 hour operation, the girl managed to remain alive. The bullet was of a small caliber, not a Varanium, but an ordinary bullet. The "Cursed Children" have astounding regenerative abilities and sturdy skullcaps; if any of these factors were lacking, the girl would not have been saved. The surgeon in charge explained to Rentaro.

Luckily, that doctor, who was ostensibly about to retire soon, understood the girl's plight. "Who in the world did this? You have to report it to the police soon." He also suggested this to Rentaro, but the latter could only leave with a wry smile on his face.

Rentaro was naturally delighted that the girl was saved, but upon thinking about the operation and inpatient warding fees, he really could not find himself much happier.

Late into the night, Rentaro was on the road, obediently waiting for the traffic light as he looked around. However, there was not a vehicle in sight, let alone a pedestrian.

Soon after, he spotted his room, 8 tatamis wide. The room was not lit, and naturally, Enju would not be awake at such a late time. However, Rentaro was

originally a little expectant that she would be waiting for him, and inadvertently felt a sense of loneliness within.

"You look really tired there, Satomi."

Rentaro instinctively raised his handgun and pointed it at where the voice came from.

He slowly turned behind, and a handgun was pointed at his nose.

The custom weapon was probably originally a Beretta, and the gas port was equipped with a muzzle pipe used for Close Quarter Combat. The large stabilizer used to restrict the gun's recoil had a retractable blade attachment, and right at the bottom was an elongated magazine with more bullet capacity. On the left side of the slide, there were the words 'Give life with dignity', and on the right side 'Otherwise, give death as a martyr'. There was a medallion with the wicked god Cthulhu engraved on the grip, and numerous screws on the other parts of the gun. As for the one wielding the gun—

"You really have a horrible taste in guns, Kagetane Hiruko."

"Heheh, good evening, Satomi."

The masked gentleman dressed in a tuxedo simply lowered his gun. Shockingly, he was also wielding another custom Beretta with a different color.

"This black automatic pistol is called 'Spanking Sodomy', while this silver one is called 'Psychedelic Gospel'. These are my beloved guns."

"…What are you here for?"

"To be honest, I came here to talk. Would you please put your gun down too?"

"I refuse."

"Oh dear."

Kagetane Hiruko snapped his fingers.

"—Kohina, cut off that obstructive right arm."

"Yes, papa."

Rentaro instinctively leapt backwards, and with the sound of wind ruptured, a slash came at blinding speed towards where he last stood. Without any

forewarning, a girl dressed in a black one-piece dress stood beside Kagetane. Kohina looked ready to cry as she showed a troubled look.

“Hey, don’t move, or your head will fall off.”

A chill ran down his spine, and cold sweat broke out.

This is bad, I can’t see her sword slashes. If she does it again—

Kohina again raised a dust cloud and disappeared from Rentaro’s sights. He tried to focus his eyes on her, but was unable to keep up. At this moment, he could only close his eyes helplessly.

GINK! Two objects clashed in the air, letting out a loud sound. A chafing sound then rang, and both of them were sent flying away. They both exclaimed in unison.

“I didn’t manage to kick her?”

“Eh, I didn’t slice her?”

“Enju!”

The blazing red eyed Enju stood beside Rentaro.

“Rentaro, who’re they?”

“Enemies.”

Kohina raised her swords as she proceeds forward, ostensibly protecting Kagetane. She showed a completely different expression from her previous tentative look, steadied her footing, crossed her two Varanium black blades, and got into a unique battle stance.

“Be careful, papa. That child…is strong. She’s probably an initiator who specializes in kicking.

“Oh, if Kohina is able to say such a thing now, it looks like you have quite the impressive Initiator.”

Kohina called out,

“The little one over there, state your name!”

Her face red with fury, Enju was jumping about,

“How rude, you’re the pipsqueak there! I’m called Enju, Enju Aihara, a rabbit-type initiator!”

Kohina lowered her head, and murmured with a piqued expression.

"…Enju, Enju Enju—understood. I'm the model mantis type, Kohina Kagetane. I'm invincible in close combat."

Kohina then tugged at Kagetane's coat with a dejected expression.

"Can I chop that rabbit up? Is it okay if I just chop her head off?"

"What are you saying, foolish daughter? No can do."

"Uuu, I hate you, papa!"

At his wits end, Kagetane adjusted his top hat, and again turned to Rentaro,

"It really looks like we'll be in a stalemate here. Are you sure you want to battle?"

Rentaro did not dare to let his guard down as he stared at Kagetane and looked around. It was a residential area, and there would be major damages if they were to fight at this place.

Rentaro bit on his lower lip hard, and then lowered his handgun.

"Hurry up and say what you want, fool. I'm sleepy, and I still need to study for a mini-test next week."

Kagetane let out a chuckle from behind his mask as he kept his handgun in his holster, and with the moon in the background, he suddenly reached his hand forward.

"I shall go straight to the point then. Satomi, do you wish to be my comrade?"

"W-what?"

"To be honest, when I first met you, you've piqued my interest for some reason, and I just can't bring myself to kill you. If you are willing to follow me, I'll spare your life."

"…I'm still a member of Civil Security either way."

"So what? I used to be one too. Unfortunately, the Tokyo area shall be blown into oblivion by the storm of extinction, and right now, I have a powerful backer. As long as you become my ally, I can get you anything, whether it's women, power or anything else."

"…"

"Satomi, have you never thought of changing this irrational world? There is an issue with the issue of the Tokyo Area. Have you never had such a notion?"

Rentaro recalled the image of that unknown girl in his mind. Back then, her head jerked backwards slowly, and blood spurted out from her forehead. It slowly dripped down, and was slowly absorbed by the ground surface.

He recalled the image of the girl's eyes as she refused to accept the predicament that faced her, the image of the policemen smirking because of this dark humor they enjoyed, and the image of his cowardly self when he did not dare to charge out for fear of being shot down.

Kagetane suspected that Rentaro was still hesitant, took a white cloth from his pocket and dropped it onto the floor. He counted to 3—and removed it, revealing a briefcase there.

"From what I heard, it seemed you aren't very well off financially."

Kagetane then kicked the briefcase, and once it slid to a stop in front of Rentaro, the lid sprang open. There were stacks of cash inside.

"This is a little token from me."

Rentaro continued to stare at the bundles of cash laid out in front of him.

"I suppose you made that little Enju there attend school while disguised as a human. Why do you do that? Those girls take the form of humans from the next generation, surpassing the existing homosapiens—the only ones who will survive the apocalypse are people with power, like me. Follow me, Rentaro Satomi."

Rentaro kicked the briefcase back with all his strength, and fired three shots at it.

The briefcase bounced up, and there were holes in the bundles as several notes fluttered about.

Kagetane stared at the briefcase that was shot,

"…You made a grave mistake there, Satomi."

“Mistake? If I made one, it would be that I didn’t kill you at the first moment we met, Kagetane Hiruko!”

“Fool! Are you going to follow through on every request? No matter how you serve them, they continue to betray you!”

Rentaro glared at Kagetane, and the latter repaid the favor.

Some time passed, and the sirens of the patrol cars could be heard approaching from afar after having heard gunshots from afar.

“Humph, I suppose we should pause here for the moment, Satomi. Though this isn’t in my best interests…you shall understand when you head to school tomorrow. It’s about time you should see reality.”

Kagetane hissed at Rentaro, took a great leap backwards, and faded into the darkness.’

Rentaro stared at where Kagetane disappeared, and asked Enju,

“What do you think of that initiator?”

“Strong, frighteningly so.”

“Can you win?”

“Not sure.”

“…Is that so?”

The words Kagetane left behind seemed to be some heavy lingering existence that was impossible to erase.

Part 2

"Are—you sure?"

Rentaro held the cellphone tightly in his hand as he got up, causing his classmates, who were chatting away leisurely, to turn around and stare at him in shock. He hurriedly lowered his voice,

"I-I'll be right there."

He covered his cellphone, immediately dashed out of the school building, and sprinted towards Magata Elementary School, located just 2 blocks away.

He hurriedly changed into the slippers for guests at this main staircase, and moved towards the staff room, only to meet the male homeroom teacher who was ready to head there. His face was pale and skinny, and there were large black rings below his eyes. He was probably shorter than Rentaro, but he was still pressing his forehead with a handkerchief even on this head. His large psychotic-like eyes were popping out,

"Ahh, you're the guardian…"

"What is this you just said? Is Enju really—"

Rentaro loomed closer, ostensibly ready to grab the other man by the collar and raise him up. He knew it was pointless to vent his rage on Enju's homeroom teacher, but he could not curb his emotions.

The latter looked back at Rentaro, and stuttered.

"Yes, we don't know where the rumor that Aihara is one of the "Cursed Children" came from, but during meal time, there was…something akin to bullying on Aihara."

"How did…this happen. Enju…didn't she deny it?"

The homeroom teacher lowered his head, and continued to press the handkerchief on his forehead. The answer was clear as day.

"Mr Satomi, I guess you've been hiding the fact that Aihara is one of the "Cursed Children" from us and let her attend school, am I right?"

"Even if I told you beforehand, you would have rejected her from entering school through some other excuse, right?"

The teacher looked away from Rentaro, and again used his handkerchief as he wiped his lips this time.

“It seemed Aihara was seriously shocked by this, so I let her return early. I shouldn’t have the right to say this, but would you please accompany her, Mr Satomi?”

Rentaro could not remember how he got back.

He unlocked the door, entered his home while gasping for breath, and the chilling air greeted him, stroking his skin gently.

Enju was not in. There was no sight of her inside the house.

An eerie chill passed through him, and without taking off his socks, he immediately opened the bath and toilet, only to see that she was not there.

Once he realized that Enju had yet to return home, Rentaro’s face inadvertently paled, but once he opened her wardrobe, he found telltale signs that she had once returned home.

Having fallen into a state of panic, Rentaro let out a long sigh, sat on the floor, fished out his cellphone from his pocket, and gave Enju’s cellphone a call.

It seemed she had switched her cellphone off, and he sent an umpteenth number of mails.

But there was no response.

Rentaro kept taking deep breaths countless times, telling himself, It’s fine, Enju will return soon.

Rentaro continued to wait.

But in the end, on that day, Enju never returned home.

Part 3

The pattering sound could be heard from afar, and Rentaro opened his eyes slightly. What first entered his hazy sights was the brown ceiling. The wooden creases on the ceiling were contorted, becoming a human being chased by a wild boar. The human ran for his life, but was caught up by the wild boar.

His vision suddenly cleared, and he turned his head around as he checked the room. He was the only one inside, and it seemed Enju had not changed her mind and returned home. Disappointed, his gut sank, and a sharp pain, ostensibly waiting for this moment, struck, causing him to kneel down on the floor.

He looked at the window panels, and the rain droplets on them distorted the scenery. *So this is what I just heard?*

His heavy eyelids were slightly numb, he felt worse than as compared to before his nap, and he felt awful. He let out a sigh.

He brought his watch to his eyes, and found that it was 7am. 50 minutes had yet to pass from the moment he fell into slumber.

After that incident the previous day, he did not eat anything at all, and his stomach was growling, causing him pain, but he was not in the mood to make food for himself.

His vision was blurry, and with his mind completely fuzzy, Rentaro climbed to the fridge, took the half-filled carton of milk, and finished it. However, all he felt in his mouth was the colloid bitterness of his saliva. From the edge of the fridge, he took a raw egg, broke it, poured it into his mouth, and in his frustration, poured some Japanese mustard and lettuce into his mouth and started chewing.

Rentaro prided himself as a good cook, so he was shocked by his own actions.

Once his body could finally move, Rentaro started to pack Enju's clothes that were scattered all over the living room.

He took out the clothes Enju left behind out from the closet, and then cuddled inside to sleep. After such a night, his only thought was that Enju was different from him in his miserly state, and that she had all sorts of colorful, fashionable clothing. Speaking of which, it seemed whenever Enju bought a piece of new clothing, she would show off to Rentaro in a revealing manner, "Is this cute? Is this cute?" and would ask such questions. At that time, how did he answer her?

Rentaro picked up a syringe lying in a corner of the closet, and there was a cobalt blue medicinal liquid inside. He was depressed upon seeing she did not inject herself. There would not be any real issues if she did not inject herself within one or two days, but the state of infection within her body would increase if she was left alone for a long time.

"Damn it!"

Rentaro threw the syringe onto the floor, hugged his head, and grimaced.

Every day, he would pick up Enju at the elementary school, and when they reached the apartment, she would grumble, demanding to eat something. As she demanded a high standard in the food, he found it a challenge to cook.

Such a daily life was thoroughly crushed.

He stood up and looked around the 8 tatami room that had become overly spacious.

Now, what would he do thereafter?

Rentaro slapped his face forcefully with both hands. He decided he had to do something.

He took off the uniform that was dishevelled on him, and went into the bathroom for a shower. The delightful hot water splashed upon his entire body, loosening his originally tense body. After the shower, Rentaro was a little closer to his normal self.

He changed into another set of uniform and looked at the mirror. His face looked a little sunken, but his eyes were still blazing as he reaffirmed that he was still in a suitable state to keep going.

After checking that there was still a close-up photo of Enju in his cellphone, he took his wallet and went out of the house. He carelessly opened it to check how much money was there, and upon seeing the contents, grinned wryly. He might have to walk back for his return trip, but he was not too concerned about it.

He hurriedly got on the train and got off at the last station. The entrance was exceptionally empty, probably because it was a morning on a holiday. He raised his umbrella, stared at the large monoliths far away, and advanced forward without hesitation.

It had been a short 10 years since the large monoliths were built as a boundary separating humans from Gastrea organisms. Tokyo was the only part unaffected in the Great War; the nearby Prefectures of Kanagawa, Chiba and Saitama were divided into fragmented regions by the large monoliths. Tokyo was renamed the Tokyo Area as a mean to control these lands, and there were 43 areas under its control as of 9 years ago.

The areas closer to the Tokyo capital would be assigned a lower serial number (the Seikyo area would be the 1st area), and the ones nearer to the boundary would have higher serial numbers.

The outer area Rentaro was about to head to was marked as area 39 on the map. This area was a boundary area directly beside the monoliths, a wasteland nobody wanted to live in.

All signs of human activity vanished at this point, and all sorts of inexplicable things could be seen. For example, there were large monstrous footprints one could not imagine would be made by humans, chairs covered with blood stains that could not be removed, 4 wheel drive vehicles with broken glass, dyed bright red on the inside due to rust growing all over, and there were some unknown reddish-purple weeds growing out from the gaps between the seats inside.

On the bulletin board that was hastily built, there were all sorts of colored paper still stuck there even after 10 years. “Sho-chan, this is Atsuko. Please contact me if you’re alright.” “To Daiki Kato—I’m at uncle’s house.” “Contact address: XXXXX. Shoji Aso.” “Looking for this child (there was a photo of a 5 year old boy attached).” “To Yoko. Papa and Fuyumi are alright (the rest of it was blurry).”

Rentaro could not help but feel unnerving sweat on him. He had a feeling his neck had a tightened noose over it, and loosened his collar.

This was an official bulletin set up to reunite people separated during the war. After the Base Station was destroyed, the cellphones became completely obsolete. This was also a place which the flames of war had engulfed, and the scars of the war against the Gastrea still lingered.

There were so many of the videos uploaded to video sites it was frustrating, as if someone really wanted to relive the situation 10 years ago, and none of them would make anyone happy upon seeing it. In the past, Rentaro once saw a video titled ‘Don’t forget that you will die one day’, and immediately ran to the basin immediately after watching it.

He continued walking on, and the vision expanded in front of him. It was due to the collapsed buildings and derelict houses becoming lesser.

Of course, there were some newly built large factories; those were power generators—through geothermal, thermal, hydro and wind power. Also, there was a nuclear generator too.

Japan was originally surrounded by sea all over, which meant strong sea breezes. Also, Japan had a tenth of the world's volcanoes, and could make use of geothermal energy as a result. The landscape of this country was complicated, and there were various differences in altitudes and terrains. This allowed for tapping into a vast amount of water-generated electricity.

In the current year 2031, the solar generators have exponentially increased in efficiency as compared to before, and in the 41st area, there was a Tokamak Generator being developed.

The electrical power used by the Central City area could be said to be provided completely by the external areas, however—

Rentaro showed a bitter expression on his face as he stared at the derelict buildings and the asphalt roads that looked a lot better.

This was how the situation was like. After this sort of disaster happened, the first parts to be repaired would be the roads used for freight. The next would be drinking water, the quintessential element of life, followed by the replenishment of food, clothing and shelter.

Why was there no progress on the rebuilding despite the roads being in decent condition? Most likely, the government never intended to rebuild the outer area.

Currently, at the outer areas, there were 3 nuclear plants.

There are 3 purposes for the outer areas; a place used to build the dangerous nuclear reactors, a dumping ground for the Central City, and finally, to scatter what was dubbed as miracle seeds, genetically modified crops that allowed for high yield over a low amount of land. In other words, the abandoned areas were to be levelled and used for agriculture (luckily, the concrete and all sorts of waste could be used as a countermeasure to lower the soil's acidity.)

None of the 3 options however had taken into consideration the fair amount of residents who stayed here.

The monoliths in Rentaro's sights got larger. Whilst it did seem there were no one here on first glance, he had the feeling someone was staring at him, and most likely, this was not simply a mere feeling.

Rentaro held tightly onto the umbrella hilt, and beside this, he was holding a child's umbrella with the Tenchu Girls design on them.

The current predicament however was more severe than what Rentaro had anticipated however. It would be unlike Enju to head to Kisara, Sumire or any of her classmates' houses. In other words, there was only one place she could go to, her hometown—the Outer Area.

Once he recovered, he found himself standing in the innermost area.

Rentaro followed his memory, arrived above a manhole, and knocked on it 2, 3 times.

Soon after, the manhole let out a heavy sound, before it was raised, and a young girl poked her head out as she said unintelligibly, "Wha—?" The girl was about 7 years old, looking back at Rentaro with a startled look. Her irises were red.

"I'm looking for someone. Can I go in?"

"Are you the police? We have no intention of leaving. Go away."

"No, that's not it, I'm not from the police."

"Then are you a sex offender?"

"Hm? A sex offender? No…that's not it…"

"Then please leave."

The manhole was shut with a bang, and Rentaro remained rooted, his mouth agape. Once he recovered from his shock, he knocked at it again.

"I really hate those annoying sex offenders!"

"Wait, hold on! Why is it only a choice between the police and a sex offender? And why do you assume that I'm the latter!?"

"Because of your appearance."

"You…brat…"

“Speaking of which, what do you want?”

Feeling really vexed, he put his umbrella aside, flashed his Civil Security License with his right hand, and showed a picture of Enju saved in the cellphone in his left hand.

“Civil Security. I’m looking for this kid. Have you seen her?”

The girl compared the License with the photo, and then said,

“I don’t know.”

“I still want to ask some others. Do you have any adults around?”

“That’ll be the Elder. I’ll look for him, so please wait inside.”

“Ah, okay…”

The girl’s strangely accentuated Japanese left Rentaro unable to reply, but he still climbed down the gangplank ladder and stood on the cloaca. The interior was unexpectedly spacious, and cleaner than what he had expected.

The foul sewage water stench that had accumulated caused migraines for Rentaro, but it seemed the girl was already used to it as she merely said to him, “Please wait here.” She then bounced about with unsteady steps as she went inside. Rentaro watched her leave from behind with some complicated thoughts on his mind.

The children living under the manhole were those who became orphans after losing their parents and brothers.

Once his visibility had gotten used to the darkness, he started to look around, only to hear footsteps echo from deep within the sewers. Walking over to him was a short, white haired man, yet his back was not hunched. He wore spectacles, giving him an intellectual look. He held a cane with a rubber cushion cover at the base, but he did seem young to be called an elder.

“I’m Rentaro Satomi.”

Rentaro handed over his Civil Security Pass. The man inspected it for a little while, and then nodded.

“So you’re the Elder that strange kid just talked about?”

"Yeah, but 'Elder' is just an affectionate nickname, haha. Matsuzaki is fine. Well, I was surprised too. Maria just said 'there's someone with a police right hand and a sex offender left hand here'; I thought it was some sort of a riddle."

It seemed that girl back then was called Maria. Perhaps it would be excruciatingly difficult to let her understand that Civil Security is different from the Police.

"Sorry, you are…?"

"Ah, I'm the one taking care of the children here."

Rentaro was secretly impressed by him. He was not homeless, but probably chose to live here on his own will. His attire was a little scruffy, but his smile gave off a powerful yet gentle presence. Perhaps this man had once took on a teaching role or something similar previously.

He nudged his glasses with his middle finger, and then stared at Rentaro in the eyes.

"This place is a lot warmer than the outside, isn't it?"

"It seems it's as you say."

In fact, Rentaro discovered it soon after it entered. He though the sewers were at most just used for sheltering from the winds and rain, but it was probable that they could last through winter here.

The water released from the power generating places are mostly hot water."

"I see. But that'll make it easier for them to fall sick, right? In such an environment…well—'

Rentaro found himself to be disrespectful the moment he said this, and his words thus trailed off at the end. However, the other party laughed it off loudly, saying,

"Not really. They get the benefits of the Gastrea Virus compared to ordinary people like us, so they will be able to adapt to such environments. Even when the Gastrea had made its way here in the past, they couldn't destroy the sewers as well, so it feels good living down here."

Rentaro watched that girl called Maria vanish deep into the sewer.

"…So she's one of the 'cursed children' after all. She's able to lift this 60kg manhole cover easily."

"So you've noticed? She's still unable to control her emotions properly. I hope that one day, she'll be able to leave this place and interact with ordinary people, but it'll be dangerous when people notice her red eyes, so she needs to learn some basic self-control."

The man turned his cane around, and happily explained to Rentaro.

Rentaro inadvertently pondered about the girl called Maria.

All the 'cursed children' were girls. The new lives born in the mothers' wombs are all female during the first 7 weeks. After that, the embryos would gain gender characteristics, and some would become male. The Gastrea Virus however causes some unknown genetic modification on the gene determining the gender, so the embryos would never become male.

"Mr Matsuzaki…you too were part of the 'robbed generation', right…"

"That has nothing to do with it. The invasion of the Gastrea against humanity has nothing to do with the children who were infected by the virus inside the womb. They, the 'Pure Generation', has nothing to do with this."

Rentaro inadvertently sighed,

"If only everyone thought like you…that's what I think."

"This is something that can't be helped though. The lingering hatred will not disappear within 10 years. Everyone's still sensitive to the term Gastrea itself, and naturally, they will be highly adverse to seeing a child carrying the Gastrea virus within walking on the street."

This unexpected ally caused Rentaro's mood to turn for the better; though he nearly ended up chatting with the other party, but he immediately remembered his objective.

"Sorry, I have something urgent to do. Did this kid come here? Her name's Enju—Enju Aihara."

Matsuzaki looked at the photo, pondered for a little while, and shook his head,

"Unfortunately, I've never seen her before."

Well, there's no way she can be found that easily.

Rentaro would not be dejected by this expected outcome. As he prepared to bow and leave, the man, for some reason, reached his cane out and requested for Rentaro to stop.

"Where are you going to next?"

"Search through the entire Area 39. This is her hometown, so I'll keep looking for her."

"It looks like you're a Promoter, and your partner ran away from you."

Rentaro was immediately rendered speechless as his sight wavered in the air, and this must have reached Matsuzaki.

"It need not be her only, right?"

"What…?"

"I do understand very well the reason for taking care of them, but it's not uncommon for Civil Security partners to be incompatible, personality wise. Once the partnership breaks up, or if a partner dies, you just need to contact the IISO and sign with a new Initiator. Your IP ranking will drastically drop for the time being, but if you have the performance, you can still climb back up. This probably isn't too difficult for a young man like you."

Rentaro quietly inhaled, and closed his eyes.

"I don't care about Initiators or Promoters, and that's not the reason why I'm looking for Enju. You're a good guy, so I thank you for that, but what I want to say is—THOSE WHO DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON CAN JUST SHUT UP!"

Matsuzaki widened his eyes in shock, and his cane fell from his hand.

Rentaro was a little regretful for being too impassioned as he clicked his tongue. But he was truly troubled by the surfacing problems, and was unable to hold in his emotions as a result.

"…Sorry, I didn't intend to yell here. I'm going now, bye."

With a look of pity on his face, Matsuzaki watched Rentaro turn away to leave, and then slowly turned his head around, saying to the darkness behind,

“You heard it now, didn’t you? He’s a good young man, no? Are you really going to watch him leave just like that, little girl?”

Part 4

The next day.

Rentaro wordlessly hung up the cellphone, and lazily lowered his arms, still unable to recover from his shock for the time being. He looked around, and found the slightly overcast sky that lingered since the previous day, the lush green Sakura trees were nearly blown away by the strong gales. The sky looked ready to pour however. The prep bell indicating the start of class caused Rentaro, who was outside the campus, to suddenly recover, but his heavy legs had no intention of moving to the classroom.

During the break between the first and second period, Rentaro recalled that he had yet to tell Enju's homeroom teacher that Enju was not attending class, and walked to the back of the campus before opening his phone.

The reply Rentaro got however was beyond his expectation.

He looked back at the school campus, hesitant on whether he should immediately return, but he immediately turned to another direction, and headed off to Magako Elementary.

He went directly to the staff room to meet with Enju's homeroom teacher. That teacher however looked lost, not knowing what expression to show.

"Yes, Aihara did come to school today."

Rentaro searched through his memories, and recalled that the bag and the textbooks at home were all taken away, and was inadvertently distressed for being careless about it.

He searched through the entire 39th Area till sunset, but did not pick up on any useful information, and could only trudge his heavy footsteps back to the apartment dejectedly.

Rentaro was then brought by the homeroom teacher to the classroom 4-3. He looked through the sliding window at the rear, and peeped inside.

Enju was inside the classroom, and though it was break time, she was just sitting on the chair, her head lowered slightly, her strong-willed eyes still staring at the table. Her seat was isolated from everyone else's, and she was completely ignored by her classmates. This pitiful scene was heartbreaking to Rentaro.

He wanted to yell out, protesting against this, but that definitely was Enju's way of fighting on, and he had no right to stop her.

"…Do you want to meet her?"

I want to, he had a lot of questions he wanted to ask once that happened.

He clutched at his own chest tightly, and took out a syringe with a cap on it to the teacher. Inside it was a cobalt blue drug fluid.

"This is?"

"The medicine for her chronic illness…"

Rentaro shook his head,

"No, I won't lie anymore. This is the suppressant used to prevent the corrosion of the Gastrea Virus. Please help me give it to her."

After saying that, Rentaro turned his back on the homeroom teacher, who seemed to have a lot more questions to ask, and ran into the gales.

Enju probably would continue to attend school afterwards, even though she knew this would only hurt her.

Rentaro was not in any mood to return to school, so he went to the University Hospital Sumire was at. He realized that though he had been attending school obediently recently, he ended up gaining the habit of skipping classes, and could only give a wry smile at that.

He passed through the demon sculpture people would spurn away from, and arrived in the underground; Doctor Sumire just so happened to have walked out from the Operating Room. She removed her green surgical garb and gloves, threw them into the trash bin "Yo", and broke a smile as she greeted Rentaro. This queen of the underground would remain at this place no matter what calamity occurred on the outside, and she would probably welcome Rentaro with a smile filled with mystique.

"What are you doing, doctor?"

"I was too bored, so I got impatient and said goodbye to Charlie. Unfortunately, he has become small parts. Ahh, as much as I'm at the peak of my excitement, I feel lonely that I have to look for a new boyfriend tomorrow."

Rentaro impatiently looked towards the ajar doors she just walked out from. This room was filled with aromatics, but they were used to remove the pungent stench coming from the dissection room—the place she called the 'kitchen'.

"I don't have anything on my side, so just do whatever you want."

Rentaro stood near the bookshelf at the left side of the room; it was crammed with the collections she—an avid movie maniac—had collected. She probably liked to put all the things she liked on the bookshelf, and there was a book titled '10th Dimension vs 11th Dimension, a Duel of the String Theory', probably about Quantum Mechanics, placed beside a H-Game Box titled 'Imprisonment Disciple 24 Hours ~ Karin is Big Brother's Pregnant Bride~'. It was truly horrible.

"…Doctors are really amazing."

"So you realize it now?"

"Those famous universities only pick students based on their grades, and end up being a hive for weirdos."

"Hahaha, don't be stupidly jealous here. The reason why I'm a genius is because my parents are both geniuses. It sure brings back such fond memories though. Mother used to read Dante's "Divina Commedia" to me as a bedtime story a few times when I was young, and she talked about how the people who've fallen into Hell are so shallow…hoho."

"…So doctor, your family's already a little wonky in the head since your parents' time?"

"I'll dissect you alive, you know."

"Please don't do that!!"

"Ah, that's right. On a side note, the demon sculpture used to ward people off is the fallen angel Lucifer, but I think you'll have a bigger impression of it if I mention the demon Satan instead, right? I didn't think that was related to the "Divina Commedia". It's a shocking foreshadowing, no?"

"…It seriously doesn't matter."

"Then, erm, where were we? 'The meaning of "Ero-manga" on Eromanga island in the local language actually refers to "humanity". Don't you find it to represent some trace of truth?' We're talking about that, right?"

"Stop joking about. We weren't talking about that!"

Rentaro was taken aback, wondering why the people surrounding him never liked to listen to what he had to say.

"I was joking there. You really are an impatient man, you know. I really pity Kisara for having a crush from such a man."

"D-Don't say that."

"Ahh, that's right. Your patron just came in."

Rentaro felt goosebumps on the back of his neck, and tersely looked around,

"That person just came?"

"Yeah. She doesn't seem to be in a good mood. She even took the initiative to go to your classroom to look for you since you never went to the student council office, but you were often unavailable, and she found it boring."

"That's because I've been deliberately avoiding her."

"Why? Isn't she the school idol?"

"She is a little c-cute, but that's because everyone doesn't know about that woman's true nature. Once she gets agitated, she'll start grabbing a Magnum Automatic and fire everywhere in school."

However, Rentaro's words trailed off at the end. As a member of Civil Security, the free weaponry and ammunition were from her.

It could be said that it was natural for Civil Security to work closely with the firearms dealer. For example, the bastard sword—the Mk IV Gibraltar Syogen Ikuma wielded was also from the sponsoring Ieskary Company. That company would also get Syogen to test new products, and once he uses their products, it would bring about a promotional effect, 'That Syogen Ikuma is also using it!' This was why these arms dealers were so passionate about looking for such Initiators and Promoters with potential. However—

"Why does she think that I have a future?"

"Isn't that because she pities you because of how pitiful you look?"

"What nonsense…"

At this moment, Rentaro suddenly thought of something else, and he pulled his shoulders back, saying,

"Sorry doctor…but I'm here today to talk about something else with you."

Sumire put back her white coat that was originally lying on the chair, and then placed two heatproof beakers under the allotted coffee maker, "Sure." She answered unhurriedly.

"What is it? Say it out."

The maker poured hot coffee into the beaker, and she then slid it to Rentaro's side of the table; it stopped right in front of him.

Once he drank the hot coffee, Rentaro felt his complicated feelings to be eased. He talked about how the girl was shot, Enju running away from home, and how he went to look for her.

A short silence gradually descended. Sumire put her hands at her chin and showed a serious expression that was yet seen.

Rentaro immediately felt uneasy about it, and rubbed his palms uneasily.

"D-Doctor?"

"Hm? Ah, sorry. I'm still thinking of what I want to make tonight."

"Hey, hold on a moment!?"

"I wasn't listening by the time it was halfway through. Your troubles are too ordinary."

"Is-Is that so…"

Rentaro remained still as he stared at the beaker, and then Sumire seemed to be giving pursuit as she spoke out freely,

"Rentaro, humanity will meet its end one day. Perhaps it will die because Earth freezes to death millions of years later, or maybe we end up devoured by the expanding sun in the distant future. Maybe a Monolith collapses tomorrow, and the Gastrea will swarm in from there and killed us all. No matter how outstanding the movie is, how critically acclaimed the masterpiece is, or how majestic the building is, it will collapse in the distant future and return to

nothing. Do you understand? On a universal scale, humanity has no reason to live in the first place."

Upon seeing Sumire show an impetuous sneer, Rentaro nearly shuddered. Is this person infected by an abnormal case of Nihilism?

"Hey, Rentaro, why do we have to kill the Gastrea in the first place?"

Rentaro immediately faltered in the face of this sudden question.

"You can't say anything?"

"Wait…of course it's because the Gastrea feasts on humans and changes their genetic codes, so they're humanity's enemy."

"In other words, the Gastrea is just an organism that's bad for humanity, right? But isn't it because humanity has become too arrogant? We humanity have thought that we've reached the apex of evolution, and look at other organisms with contempt, but that's just part of the 'awareness' humanity had gained. We are unable to correct this conceitedness, thinking that we're superior to others. But if we think about it, though we say that the 'awareness' we humans have as is proof that we are higher ranked organisms, it basically means that we have another form of 'awareness'. As long as humans are still humans, there will be no objective evidence that can prove this. For example, are the Gastrea not high level organisms? They can manipulate a biological object's genes and has the ability to take over God and redesign, no? Can't we say that this ability is beyond our 'awareness'? it is no longer trendy in Japan, but there are still many religious organizations in the world that sanctify the Gastrea. They think the Gastrea is sent by God to purify the world."

"This is too ridiculous. Why…"

"Because humanity is the main reason why the resources are depleted, causing the Earth's environment to be ruined. To this spaceship called Earth, the Gastrea might be more adept at becoming the ruler of Earth, controlling this ship. There is a saying that it is a lodging place for millions; it means that everything is just living temporarily in this inn called Heaven and Earth. Have us, humanity, turned this inn into pandemonium? Do we have to tidy the bed for the next generation of Earth's rulers before handing it over?"

Rentaro pretended to drink the coffee as he remained in deep though.

"This does seem similar to the Deep Ecology Theory, right? If we emphasize too much on the ecology, humanity will end up being unneeded. Even if

somebody has acknowledged the existence of the Gastrea, I can't agree to that. And even if we assume that the Gastrea's sent by God, what about the 'Cursed Childern'?"

"Representatives of God, messengers who can mediate between humanity and the Gastrea."

At this point, Rentaro found it unbearable, and stood up,

"Enju's a human. She's a human with an independent personality and will! She's definitely not something else."

The shock caused some coffee to splatter, and there is a trickle formed, falling from a corner of the table to the floor. Sumire gave a triumphant look, seemingly having expected it as she teasingly opened her arms wide,

"That's completely correct. it seems you understand, don't you?"

"Ah."

I've been had. Rentaro realized this, and immediately felt embarrassed over his impatience as he sat back onto the chair. Right, he said those words, for the other party had angered him, causing him to reveal his feelings regarding Enju. He was completely toyed by her.

"Hey, Rentaro. You do know your lineage at least, but Enju doesn't know at all."

"Eh?"

"The children living in the Outer Areas are practically all abandoned. They were born after the defeat, and their world is simply limited to the cramped Tokyo Area; they don't even know how their parents looked like, they'll get trampled before they even learn anything, and even have to endure the condescending looks. Soon, this first generation of 'Cursed Children' will enter puberty, and once that happens, I think their loss of identity will bring them a lot of pain. If you can be with Enju until then and guide her to the correct direction, that's good—aren't you already family?"

Rentaro's mouth opened slightly, and suddenly, he felt a chill. *To what extent has this person…*

"I'll go look for Enju then, doctor."

Sumire did not mind as she waved her hand, not looking at Rentaro again.

Once he walked out of the University Hospital, the cellphone vibrated. An anonymous number was indicated on the screen.

"Hello, is this Mr Rentaro?"

Once he heard this voice, Rentaro understood who it was.

"Yes, that's me."

"I'm Aihara's homeroom teacher. Regarding her, the situation is a little delicate at the moment…will you please hurry to the school?"

Rentaro was gasping for breath as he stood at the staircase near the entrance, and there were a few people gathered nearby. They were all gathered in a doughnut-like human ring around 2 people, who were quarrelling with each other.

Three girls walked by Rentaro.

"What's going on there?" "That's the kid from class 3. I heard that she's actually a Gastrea carrier." "You're kidding—she touched me, you know? What do I do?" "I've always hated her, you know. I find her a little too cheeky."

The strange sense of Déjà vu caused Rentaro to gasp, and he loosened his tie before heading to that group of people.

He could not hear the content of the squabbling from this point, but it seemed those two were yelling. Or rather, it was just a one-sided argument.

It seemed that whenever a boy yelled, the people surrounding them would cheer, but when it was the girl yelling, she ended up getting icy dead fish-like stares. The scene was filled with condemning silence.

Once he realized that Enju Aihara was at the center of the crowd, Rentaro had the ghastly urge to vomit, and he inadvertently covered his mouth.

The situation had gotten so intense that one would worry about it. Rentaro again tried to move towards Enju, but there was a discomforting buzzing from around.

"A red-eyed's actually around us. Why didn't Civil Security come remove them?" "Those with glowing red eyes are really disgusting. I really don't wish to have such people in our school." "Can you please leave the Tokyo Area?"

Who do you think are the ones protecting the peace in the Tokyo Area? Rentaro had the urge to immediately get amongst the human wall and beat them all up. However, upon seeing their expressions, he was left with no choice but to pull his fist back.

Most of them were here to watch the show, and they were cowardly, pointing away from behind the crowd because someone was different from them. The remaining people however were pale, and really terrified of being infected by the Gastrea Virus. If they had the correct knowledge, they would have known that it was impossible to be infected by the Virus without receiving a large amount of blood infusement from them.

Rentaro had once spotted the boy quarrelling with Enju in her class photo. He was half bald, and looked like an energetic person who really loved baseball, but his face was flushed crimson red from the agitation, and he even let out a shrill voice as he closed in on Enju.

"My dad had his leg eaten by the Gastrea during the war, and he's been drinking and beating my mom everyday! It's because people like you go about killing people that my family…"

Enju shook her head vehemently.

"No, I didn't do that. I'm human!"

"You're disgusting. Stop pretending to be human!"

"I'm human!"

"Shut up, you monster!!"

"I'm human!"

"Shut up!"

Rentaro gritted his teeth and lowered his head. He could no longer stand to see this hideous sight for they never intended to talk with each other; it was just a one-sided refusal.

"No matter how you serve them, they continue to betray you!"

This was just as Kagetane had said.

This chagrin caused Rentaro's eyes to heat up.

"…Enju."

Enju, upon noticing Rentaro, widened her eyes as she slowly took a step back.

"Re-Rentaro…"

The surrounding human wall moved aside once they knew he was Enju's friend, and a revolting silence descended upon them again.

Rentaro stepped his shoes hard into the school yard's sand, and slowly proceeded to the center. "Wh-What?" The boy who had been lashing out at Enju retorted.

Rentaro went by him, stood in front of Enju, and hugged her tightly without saying anything. He closed his eyes, and slowly uttered out these words,

"Enju, let's transfer schools."

Enju's little body, embraced in his arms, remained motionless. Her thoroughly icy body then shivered slightly, and a warm liquid drenched Rentaro's uniform on the shoulder.

"I-don't want to admit defeat. I already made so many friends here."

"They're no longer friends."

He heard Enju sob away.

"…Is it over for me now? Can't I retry again?"

"Yeah. It's over. It'll take a little more time before this world accepts you."

"But we still have to fight, don't we?"

"……Yeah."

Rentaro used his fingers to wipe her tears away, and then placed his handkerchief on her face, letting her cry all she wanted for the time being. He then let go of her, stood up, and smiled,

"Let's go. We still need to leave with our heads held high."

"But my school bag's in the classroom."

"That thing doesn't matter anymore, does it?"

"Y-Yes! That's right!"

Enju wiped her tears away with her sleeves, looking very delighted and lively.

—*This is good, Enju.*

At this moment, Rentaro's cellphone vibrated again. He wanted to ignore this call at first, but once he noticed the name of the incoming caller on the sub-display, he pressed the call button.

"Rentaro, we know where the Gastrea source is hiding at. It's at Area 32."

"Mi— no, Chief…Area 32? How did it get that far…?"

"You'll be shocked once you hear this. it seems that Gastrea can fly."

Rentaro at first doubted his ears, wondering if something was wrong, and he held onto the cellphone properly again,

"The infected is rewritten to a Model Spider, right? That means the source of the Gastrea source should be a spider type. Have you ever heard of a flying spider?"

"Anyway, hurry to the scene. The other Civil Security have also locked on to this Gastrea. Phew, but the Tendo Civil Security Company will definitely have a headstart. I can track your positions using the GPS. I just contracted with an amazing person, and we can use that for tracking. I spent all the money for my next academic year just to get that, and I'll have to transfer school if someone else gets the credit! Got it? Do you best then."

"Ah, wait, hold on a moment, Miss Kisara?"

Upon hearing the empty sound of the phone being hung up, Rentaro sighed as he flipped the cellphone shut again. 'Contracted an amazing person', what was that about anyway?

At this moment, there was a buzzing from the field, mixed with shrieks. Rentaro looked towards where the crowd was pointing at, and groaned. That thing got larger in his sights, and the booming of the rotors became a shockwave that overrode all other sounds, raising the dust on the ground.

He narrowed his eyes as he looked up; the shiny white body flying in the air had its upper body painted blue, and there was also the image of a snake climbing

up a staff in the middle of it. It was an emblem of the God Asclepius in Greek Mythology.

Rentaro felt a little uneasy within. *I guess that's to be expected of a princess, being on a completely different scale in whatever we do.*

The teacher blankly lifted his head up and stared, muttering,

"That's a Doctor's Helicopter…"

Part 5

The rain poured harder soon after the helicopter lifted off, and it was a torrential downpour.

Rentaro placed his hand on his cheek uneasily, turning his body around, checking if the copilot seat was stable.

Within the moving helicopter was a deafening silence, more terrifying than the unstable weather outside.

Enju was seated at the rear ejection door originally meant for the patient to enter with the stretcher. There was a door in the middle, so Rentaro, seated at the copilot seat, could not look behind and check on her.

I should be sitting at the back with Enju, Rentaro thoroughly realized this as he stared at the Shakujii River, flooding due to the downpour. He could have spent the time talking to her before they arrived at the scene.

Rentaro looked at the GPS beacon Kisara had sent over. The rain has rendered the satellites obsolete, so this was the position from 10 minutes ago, and it was very likely that the marker had flown away from this place.

As they approached the Outer Area, he could see the Monoliths there, as large as a mountain range.

He still could not believe they were large slabs made out of Varanium, probably the equivalent of several thousand handgun bullets he had used. No, it might be a lot more than that.

"What's that?"

There was a flying object down below, at where the pilot was pointing at. Rentaro looked at it intently as he brought his forehead to the window. There was an arrowhead-shaped object flying 80m above the ground.

A kite circling about in the sky; that was the first notion that came to Rentaro's mind. The white object, resembling the shape of an isosceles triangle, was floating above the forest. Through it, he could spot 8 long slender legs.

"A spider parachute...damn it, so that's how it is? Pilot, please go after it."

"Can you tell what it is?"

"I do. That's the Gastrea source. There is a species of spider in South America that turns its web into a parachute form, and rides on it for several hundred kilometres. I think a good way of imagining it is that it's basically similar to how dandelion seeds are dispersed. The spider web can be considered a type of polymer, but I never expected a Gastrea to spin a web like a kite…"

Upon this, a new doubt suddenly crept into Rentaro's mind, and he ceased his explanation.

Why was that kite an Isosceles Triangle? Had he left out something?

Rentaro's mind then clicked,

"I see…it's not a parachute, but a glider. If that's the case, it all makes senses. The sharp tip reduces air resistance and generates lift. That's why the eyewitness information of this Gastrea is so sporadic. That thing's pretty amazing too; I guess there's no adult spider with such an ability in this world."

He had finally grasped the reason why the surveillance cameras on the streets had never caught sight of it. The surveillance cameras in the Outer Areas were meant to catch sight of the target below, so their lenses were always pointed down. They were rendered obsolete however once there was this Gastrea that could glide.

This Gastrea probably climbed up the wall of a skyscraper with its legs, and from the roof, drifted away through the use of the wind. It seems it was quite intelligent.

"Wh-what do I do?"

"Lower you height and try to match its speed. Track it from above."

Suddenly, a sound rang through the metal plates, and the helicopter staggered to the side. Rentaro's head ended up crashing into the glass.

"Ouch. What's going on!?"

"The door at the back was forcefully opened. I think it's the Initiator you brought along."

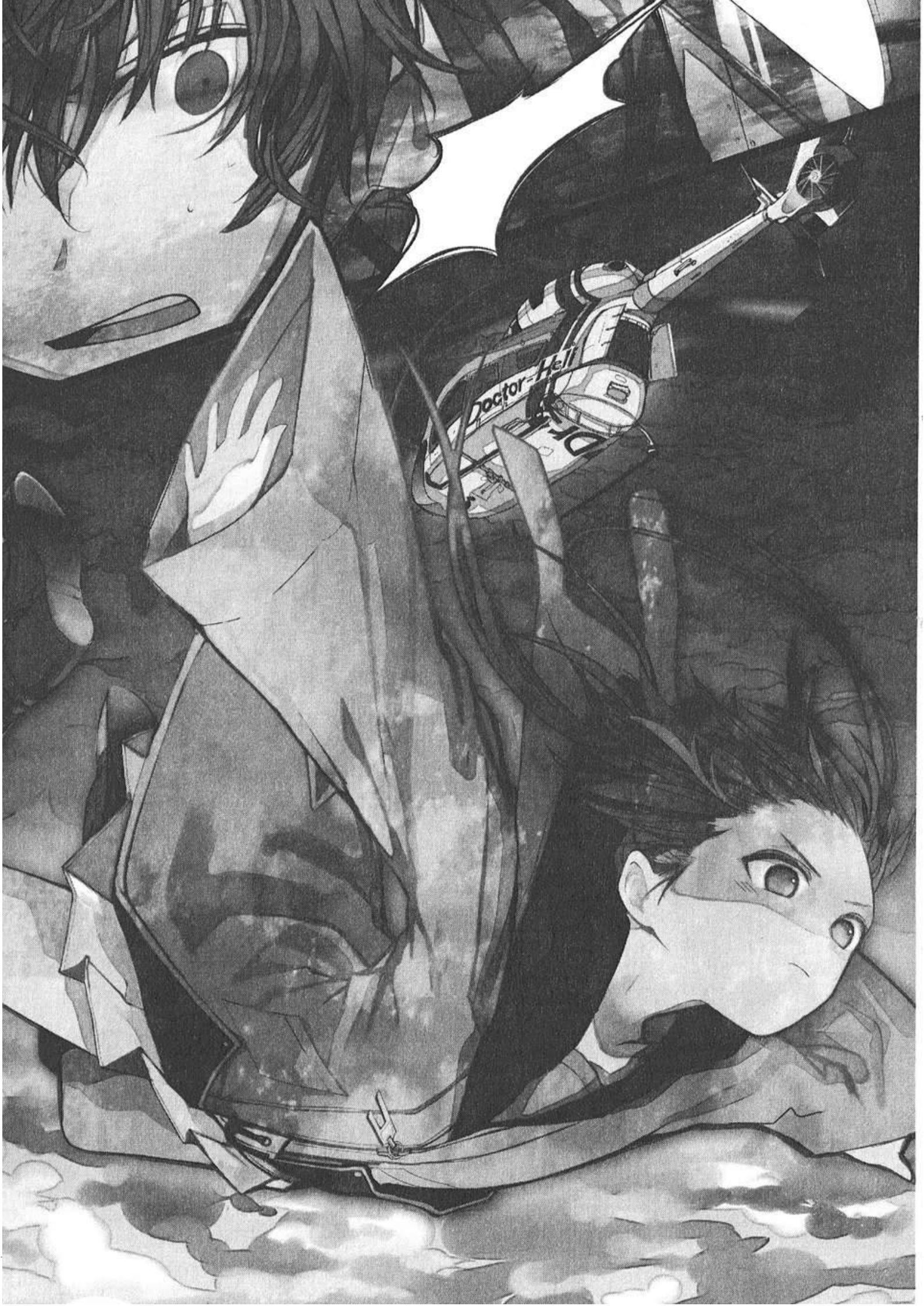
"Enju? That's impossible, we're still flying. What does she—"

At this point, Rentaro finally understood Enju's intentions, and he felt his spine seemingly freeze.

“Wait a moment, Enju!”

It was too late for him to yell, for he personally witnessed Enju diving headfirst in the air.

Her body got smaller as she fell according to gravity, etching out a trajectory, and Rentaro nearly screamed.


Doctor-Heli

Enju crashed towards the Gastrea glider wings, made from spider web, like a meteor, and knocked into it right at the top, a blind spot even for a Gastrea. Both sides ended up tumbling with each other as they fell to the forest beside the river.

"Descend now! Hurry!"

Rentaro quickly looked around, and found some vinyl rope used for packaging. There was no time to hesitate.

He pulled the rope hard, wrapped two loops around a corner of his seat, and tugged at it again to check its tautness.

The instant he kicked the door open, the torrent and strong gales, which were blocked by the thick glass, splattered upon his face. The rear and side doors being opened probably increased the impact from the winds, as the helicopter was very unstable since a moment ago. The dangling vinyl rope Rentaro threw down was flushed by the strong winds, and the grip of the vinyl rope felt vastly different from the rope used for extraction. Naturally, there would not be any safety rope or carabineer included.

He looked down, and the astounding height caused him to experience vertigo.

The pilot widened his eyes as he looked at Rentaro. *Even I wonder if I'm insane.*

Here goes nothing, Rentaro prayed as he latched his limbs onto the rope, and leapt into the air.

The vinyl rope, drenched by the rain, was more slippery than he had imagined. Though he had wanted to descend gradually, he was unable to do so. The skin on his palms holding onto the rope burned, and at that moment, he heard the whoosh of a sudden gust, causing the rope to sway greatly.

It was too late by the time he was in trouble.

A chilling sensation arose in him, and he was thrown into the air. He flailed his arms around as he was practically thrown into a state of panic, but the ground still swirled as it closed in on him with shocking momentum.

—Will I fall headfirst? —Not good — correct my posture –ease the impact with my legs.

His mind was clicking into gear at an amazing thing, and though it was merely in the blink of an eye, it felt as if time had flowed slowly.

After what felt like an eternity, Rentaro spun in the air and let his legs face down before he landed.

The shock affected his organs. His body was churned about several times, and he rolled about 4 times, ostensibly blown away by some force. By the time he had recovered, he found himself lying in the mud.

He took large breaths, trying to regain the oxygen that had just left his body, and spit out the disgusting mud from his mouth.

His three semicircular canals were all damaged, and he was unable to get up until his swirling vision stabilized.

Once he felt the focus of his consciousness become clearer, he waved weakly at the helicopter that was staggering about in the air with consternation. He then got up, aching all over. The height was probably about 20m; it was said that a human would die from a 15m height fall, and he felt inexplicable, wondering why he was still alive.

At this moment, Rentaro found that the ground he had landed on was covered with mud puddles because of the torrent.

Where's Enju? Right, I have to find her.

Rentaro shielded his left leg as he stood up, and moved deep into the forest beside the river.

The deluge splattered on his face, and the droplets befuddled his vision. His soaked hair was sticking on his face, making him uncomfortable, and his uniform, having sucked in the water, felt extremely heavy. The frigid air caused him to inadvertently rub his arms.

Continuous sounds of battle could be heard from the other side of the tall and large greenery.

Rentaro climbed a small hill where his sight was covered by the trees, and a battle was under way below him.

On one side was the Type Spider Gastrea, baring its poisonous fangs and thrusting its 8 rapier-like legs skilfully. As Rentaro had anticipated, it had

reduced its weight to the minimum so that glide in the air; it had black and yellow spots on its body, and it resembled a long-legged spider.

However, on the other side, Enju's eyes were blazing, and she had seen through all of the Gastrea's actions.

She skilfully dodged past the lunges the enemy attacked her with, quickly got below the Gastrea's body, used the Varanium weight hidden in the sole, and kicked at it hard.

It was a direct hit on the Gastrea's body, ripping through its flesh, shredding its lower jaw and its fangs as well. It got kicked 10m into the air, and after a flip in the air, crashed into the floor.

The fluids flying everywhere even splattered on Rentaro's uniform.

The thin wire-like legs were severed into 3 bits, and fluids continued to flow out from its torso. The battle had been decided.

"Rentaro, I beat it! We got it first!"

Once Enju noticed Rentaro, she waved her hands at him. Rentaro too felt relieved.

"You were too reckless there. I thought you had given up on everything—"

Rentaro walked towards Enju, and placed his hand on her shoulder. At that moment, she immediately winced.

"…Are you hurt anywhere?"

"It-It doesn't hurt at all! I just tweaked my left leg slightly, I'll be fine in an hour!"

Rentaro then knocked Enju on the head.

"Ngh! What're you doing!?"

"You…idiot. There's no way you're okay. A kid doesn't have to endure this."

Rentaro tilted his head, seemingly unable to feel relieved as he approached the Gastrea carcass. Having shrank its legs back after collapsing to the floor, the Gastrea looked unexpectedly small.

The Duralumin case mentioned in the request was just as reported, engulfed within the Gastrea's body, wrapped around the upper torso. There was no scale to make use of in the previous picture, but it seemed it was just large enough for a person to carry it.

"What, is this…?"

There was a long handcuff attached to the handle of the Duralumin case. It seemed the victim had fastened it onto his hand to prevent it from slipping off before he became a Gastrea. However, the victim's corrosion level ended up beyond the limit.

The sound of rain sounded exceptionally gloomy in Rentaro's eyes.

He stepped on the Gastrea carcass, and barely managed to pull out the case with the handcuff, before trudging a few steps back. Suddenly, he felt a chill on his back. It did not matter what was inside the case, he just wanted to hand this over and finish the mission.

Rentaro turned his neck and looked around, but did not find anyone else. It was about time for the other Civil Security members to arrive. The fibres of the clothes were rubbing at his body, and he felt a stinging pain.

"Hi hi, good work there, Satomi."

"Eh?"

The instant he turned his head around, a white mask was right in his face. The slender fingers grabbed him on the face, and he was then slammed into the sticky mud water.

"Ack!"

Rentaro struggled mightily, but was still dragged by the overwhelming force, and slammed hard into the tree branch.

The inertia left him helpless as the blunt impact smashed upon his back. He felt the oxygen in his lungs being squeezed out, and his vision immediately darkened as his consciousness almost faded away.

"Rentaro!"

"—I found you, Enju."

Enju instinctively rolled to the side, and the shrubs behind her was instantly hacked into 3 parts, seemingly letting out a loud noise as it tumbled backwards.

Kohina, wielding two Varanium black blades, looked ready to spread wings as she appeared and got into position.

Rentaro, coughing furiously, tried his best to get up as he glared at the man giving off an ominous presence, wearing a smiling mask.

"Kagetane—Hiruko—!"

"Your chairperson may look cute, but her methods are really crude. She actually brazenly went around asking who my sponsor is, so they ordered me to hurry and dispatch you."

Rentaro felt a chill and slowly retreated back, bringing the Duralumin case behind him. Kagetane however ridiculed at his actions,

"Are you hoping for other Civil Security members to support you? I will advise you to give up on that notion. I did clear out all the small fries on my way here."

At this moment, Rentaro could clearly see that Kagetane's wine red tuxedo was dyed with the blood of others, and was inadvertently intimidated.

He drew his XD and fired, but Kagetane had read his actions.

"It's useless. Imaginary Gimmick!"

Once he called out, the bullet seemed to hit an intangible wall and it was deflected into a different direction.

The rain again echoed in Rentaro's ears, and Kagetane leisurely spread his arms wide, seemingly boasting that he was unscratched.

It's not over yet. Rentaro threw the Duralumin case away and got ready for melee combat, steadying his foothold on the field and exerting force into it.

"Tendo Style Martial Arts, Type 1, Number 8—'Flaming Fan'!"

This move was a straight punch using all his strength, but the fist collided heavily with the sturdy pale green protective shield, causing him to miss.

Kagetane then drew his custom Beretta from his holster, flicked his bayonet and stabbed it into Rentaro's shoulder, before firing another 3 shots up close.

"Argh…!"

The sharp pain caused Rentaro to grab onto his shoulder and tumble. His back knocked into something; it was a rock, and he had nowhere to run to.

Kagetane deliberately raised his arm slowly and pointed at Rentaro,

"I shall show you my move then. "Maximum Pain"!"

The repulsion field that originally surrounded Kagetane suddenly expanded massively, lunging towards Rentaro.

It was an unexpected horizontal impact that struck him, and it sent Rentaro crashing to the rock with alarming force, causing blood to spill from his head. His body was crushed into the rock, his muscles were flattened, and his bones were about to let out eerie creaking sounds. It felt as if his entire body was squashed by a steamroller.

Rentaro finally understood as he let out the cry. When he first met Kagetane, the police squad that first charged into the apartment were crushed to death onto the wall. This skill was used to kill them.

The sudden tremendous pressure vanished, and Rentaro's knees were on the ground as he coughed out blood.

"Oh, you're still alive…?"

Rentaro's vision was severely contorted, and he experienced a splitting headache.

—I never expected that guy to be so powerful.

There was a vast difference in fighting ability between Rentaro and Kagetane, and Enju too had her foot injury. Rentaro's mind coolly calculated the most appropriate tactic, and he then weakly lifted his head.

"Run away, Enju."

Enju widened her eyes and shook her head,

"No!"

Rentaro could see Kohina behind Enju, getting ready to lunge, and then fired once beside Enju's foot. Enju then instinctively leaped backwards.

He was begging her with his eyes to find other Civil Security members.

And so, with an anguished expression, Enju disappeared deep into the forest.

“Papa! Enju’s running away! I wanna cut her! I wanna chase after her!”

Kohina was very displeased that her battle was suddenly interrupted.

“No can do, my daughter. It will be troublesome if they meet up with other Civil Security members. Let us finish the job.”

Kohina glared at Rentaro, and the next moment, the latter only noticed that she had vanished from his eyes, before he felt a strong impact in his abdomen.

There were 2 Varanium Black blades poking out from Rentaro’s abdomen.

It took a few seconds for him to comprehend that he was stabbed in the back.

“You’re weak! You’re weak! You’re weak!”

Blood foamed in Rentaro’s mouth, and at the same time, he shook Kohina off with a backhand and tried to run away while firing. But for every shot he fired, the recoil aggravated his wounds, creating enough pain to knock his consciousness away. He gritted his teeth as he fired randomly, for he intended to escape before doing anything else.

Though he was hasty, his footsteps had become slow, and his vision was blurry. The rain robbed him of his body warmth, and he felt freezing cold.

He put his hand on his belly, pushing aside the screen of forest as he proceeded forward, and finally reached an open place.

The river, now in high tide, was beside him, and the current was such that it was impossible for him to swim across. He stood on the bank and slowly looked around, finding Kohina and Kagetane, the latter pointing the barrel of his Custom Beretta at him.

The white noise-like rain pinged at Rentaro’s ears. He closed his ears. *Enju, Miss Kisara, I’m sorry.*

“…Any last words? As a dying friend, of course.”

“See you…in Hell.”

“Good night.”

The full automatic shots of the Beretta opened little black holes in Rentaro's chest, flank and legs.

Rentaro was unable to grip his handgun as his upper body slowly fell. In a corner of his fading vision, he could see Kagetane drawing a cross on his chest.

He landed into the water, and was taken away by the high tide at a shocking speed.

Someone was slapping Rentaro's face hard, making a vexing noise. Someone else was calling his name.

With much difficulty, Rentaro opened his eyes, and the long fluorescent lights on the ceiling passed one after another. In the corner of his eyes, he could see the white clothed paramedics.

It seemed he was lying on a stretcher, taken into the A&E department.

He was practically freezing, and his breathing was unimaginably frantic. There was a lingering metallic taste of blood filling his mouth, rendering him unable to breathe. Some blood probably entered his lungs, and he was in anguish. "You'll be fine." "We'll get you some emergency aid." –the paramedics said as they ushered him in, but their words were just like empty wind to him.

The stretcher let out a loud noise as it entered the innermost part of the Operating room, and a female doctor, dressed in green surgical grab, brought her face to Rentaro's.

Her collarbones were well-chiselled, and she was skinny to the bone. The eyeballs and the sunken areas around the eyes, which were the only dazzling parts.

Rentaro turned his head to the side, and upon seeing the mirror in the Operating Room, he nearly screamed.

His right arm and leg were severed, and his left eye was dug out. However, the most shocking thing was that his body had shrunk to a point of a child.

—No. I remember. This was in the past.

The female doctor coldly looked upon Rentaro, who would die anytime, and brought two pieces of paper, held separately in her hands, to him.

"Yo, you must be Rentaro Satomi, I suppose? It's nice to meet you, but we will soon be saying goodbye. In my left hand is a death certificate. 5 minutes later, I'll have to write on this piece of paper to finish the procedures, and your identity will be erased forever. In my right here is a contract. This one can save your life, but you'll have to sacrifice everything other than your life. Choose. You just have to point with your left finger."

Rentaro felt an unbelievably acute pain just by raising his hand. His hand was trembling involuntarily, and he coughed out blood, dirtying the stretcher. His body was sprawled like a paralytic.

Kikunojyo Tendo's words inadvertently replayed in his mind.

"If you don't want to die, live on, Rentaro!"

Rentaro pointed at a piece with his stupidly pale finger. "Good boy" the female doctor said, showing a satisfied smile. Rentaro then passed out.

BLACK BULLET CHAPTER 03

第三章
世界を滅ぼしたガストレア

Chapter 03 - The Gastrea that Destroyed The World

Part 1

beep *beep*

Those were the first sounds he heard.

He felt warm and comfortable being wrapped in something very soft. The pungent smell of medicine impacted his nose. Although it was vague, he could feel the light through his closed eyelids. He couldn't help but make a sullen face at the residual bitter taste in his mouth.

Waking up, it felt like his consciousness was climbing up from the bottom of a pit. The fact that he could still retain his consciousness despite that surprised Rentaro.

He wanted to open his eyes, his eyelids felt heavy, and he could only continue to wink a little. After a long time he could finally see a hazy, pale blue light which looked completely different from his wooden ceiling. At the moment he was sleeping on a bed.

Kisara's image then appeared in that scene. Dressed in a uniform of the Miwa Academy for Girls, she was looking over Rentaro with bright, jet-black eyes, which were moist with tears.

Her hair brushed past his nose releasing her faint aroma into the air. The other end of her deep-black hair leads people to think that its a little green. Looking at Kisara — in a trance, Rentaro praises her beauty in his heart.

"... Hey, Miss Kisara."

He tried to smooth out the attitude of that sentence.

Kisara closed her eyes and bit her lip, her eyelashes could not stop trembling, finally, with tears in her eyes, she desperately made a smile:

"Welcome Back, Satomi."

"Is this heaven?"

"This is hell, Idiot."

Rentaro looked around at the coffee table.

"..... You cut the apple huh?"

Kisara wiped her eyes with her sleeve.

"Do you want to eat it?"

"No, obviously I haven't eaten anything, but I'm not very hungry."

Then he looked back to Kisara's direction.

"How long have I slept?"

"A full day and three hours, and that was after a major surgery, even the doctors almost gave up, but at the very end your heart jumped up and started thumping. It seems like you didn't abandon the will to live, that's really great."

Kisara's index finger poked Rentaro's chest, stroking his heart and then she patted around a few other places. Rentaro could not stop his heart beat from getting faster.

He tried to get his upper body to sit up reluctantly, Kisara immediately stopped him, but Rentaro shook his head, Kisara no longer opposed. He confirmed that he could still move his right arm, right leg, then finally touched his left eye.

"Honestly, you should stay still and rest."

"Miss Kisara, how were you able to know my location when i was swept away?"

"Because of this."

Saying that Kisara took out Rentaro's handgun from a bag. She slid off the retaining clips locking the sleeve. That meant that it had the leftover XD bullets that weren't shot. He remembered that this was the gun he used in the fight that he lost.

"The gun was fallen nearby the river so I guessed that you might have been washed away downstream."

Finally understanding his own reasons to survive. Rentaro opened and closed the palms of his hands confirming that there were no abnormalities, he noticed that Kisara was inadvertently staring at him.

"A lot of things happened when you were asleep. Well ..... where do I start?"

Kisara raised her chin with a beautiful posture and bent her lips.

“We’re probably going to die.”

“W-What?”

“It would be more accurate to say that everybody in the Tokyo Area are likely to die.”

“This can’t be... Kagetane Hiruko?”

“.....Would you please listen to me calmly, here’s the real ’inside’ information that only a set of representatives of the Civil Security are entrusted with, that suitcase is in fact filled with a catalyst that can summon Stage V Gastrea.”

Rentaro had no immediate reaction, He tried to control his expressions until he found that his palms were sweating.

“Stage V — refers to the destruction of the world 10 years ago..... doesn’t it?”

“What else could it be?”

Ah, A Mass Extinction.....

“But Miss Kisara, its impossible to summon an artificial Stage V!”

“It is possible, I also heard that the first time. It seems that it was Seitenshi’s group, that is, those officials concealed it”

Rentaro could see the faces of Seitenshi and Kikunojyo looking discomposed and speechless. This is why he hated those in power .

“..... go on.”

“The members of Civil Security were very heroic, no man fainted and nobody panicked, in exception of a few people who ran to the bathroom the others remained calm.”

“Satomi, Enju told me that you encountered Hiruko Kagetane. What happened?”

“Too strong ..... he isn’t human.”

“According to information Seitenshi’s group also came there. Promoter Kagetane Hiruko — he seems to be able to emit a force-field that can repel anti-

tank rifle bullets, or even resist being hit by a crane with a wrecking ball. Initiator Kagetane Kohina — is a mantis type, that is, an initiator with a Mantis Gastrea Factor, It is said that her melee weapon fighting inside her attack range is invincible. Because the pair often caused trouble, their licenses were revoked, but their final IP Ranking was 134. You're lucky to be alive."

"ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-FOUR!!"

Rentaro's eyes widened. No wonder that guy was stronger than him by such an exaggerated extent. It was the first time he had ever seen first-hand someone with a rank higher than his partner, he was again glad that he could keep this little life.

"They have fled to the 'Outer Area' outside the Monoliths, and are preparing to bring a Stage V Gastrea to the Tokyo Area, so now the government is leading a large scale battle operation."

"So, all that actually happened when i was sleeping....."

Suddenly both of them stopped talking and the quiet atmosphere of the night enveloped them.

Kisara gently narrowed her eyes :

"—— So Enju, you can come out right?"

"What? ..... Enju?"

"You two perverts!"

The voice came from somewhere near.

At this point Rentaro's blanket suddenly bounced, and Enju came from inside. Rentaro was more surprised himself.

"...Whoa wait, from where did you just ——"

"I've been lying next to you all this time, while you were carelessly dozing off, but I heard it all, Including Rentaro's shy voice. So you think Kisara is better in the end?, she's just boobs!"

Hearing that Kisara looks at her chest in displeasure.

"—Wait, you guys, I was sleeping till just now, knowing that you still fell asleep beside me?"

Enju sticks her chest out and proudly says :

"Your doctor and nurses were too slow with your treatment."

"Nobody told you to discuss things about how my treatment is done. Go get into bed with someone else, okay? At least let me get some rest when I'm sleeping"

"People have the freedom to sleep where they want now"

"You, you guys....."

"Firstly, Satomi don't Bicker, and you don't have to talk to Enju that way."

".....Right. Sorry for saying that kind of thing."

Enju clung to Rentaro's neck. Rentaro too quietly help Enju's slim body.

"I don't qualify as your guardian."

"That's..... As a guardian Rentaro really sucks."

In contrast with that statement, Enju was crying with a runny nose.

"The thought of Rentaro dead — you can understand my feelings right ....."

Rentaro patted Enju's shoulder to calm her.

"Really ..... sorry."

At that time, Kisara's phone starts ringing. The ringtone is Ravel's *"Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant"*.

Kisara just says a few words, then hands the phone to Rentaro.

"Mr. Satomi, Its me."

Rentaro was shocked for a moment and continued to stare at the phone.

"..... Seitenshi, What is it?"

"Mr. Satomi, the operation in persuit of Kagetane Hiruko is about to begin, many Civil Security Companies will participate, this will be the biggest

operation in history. Although your body has just recovered, I hope you can attend."

"There is one thing I would like to ask that Hiruko guy——."

"..... The Tendo president there should have informed you about it to a certain level, about ten years that guy killed the staff at a public hospital and escaped. After the post-war period, he took advantage of the chaos and became part of Civil Security ..... He also changed his name to conceal from our government the fact that he was a fugitive."

Rentaro desperately held onto the phone, nearly crushing it.

"..... Why didn't you take any countermeasures?"

"Mr. Satomi, the 'New Human Creation Plan' never existed, therefore it is impossible that a soldier might have escaped."

"No Kidding! Do you know how many people he killed! It's all because of you! Why would I want to help you, who would want to do something like that!"

"Mr. Satomi, if you don't fight now then more people will be injured or killed, including your most beloved people, and dear friends. Can you tolerate such things?"

Rentaro's covered his face with his hands and shook his head weakly.

"Its confusing ..... Why me?"

"You should know the reason why. Its because only you can stop Kagetane Hiruko."

Rentaro sighed heavily:

"All right ..... but remember that I'm not doing this for you."

"Anyway, Satomi, I hope that you will succeed."

Rentaro cut the call, and threw the phone back to Kisara.

He felt something pulling on his arm, looking around the pillows he saw various machines with values showing his vital signs. He turns the power off and confirms that the alarm doesn't sound when the electrodes and needles on his bodies are unplugged.

Touching a wound caused severe pain making him frown. But he was barely able to support himself, this was probably possible because he received the most advanced forms of treatment in the intensive care ward. The bandages stuck to his body wouldn't come off, as long as he didn't do any activities which were intense. After stripping away the hospital clothes he looked inside the bag for his uniforms. Kisara blushed saying : "Stupid." with her head turned away.

"Satomi. Is there a chance?"

"No, ah I can't win."

"Oh, you will die then."

"I realized that long before waking up"

The sound of Kisara biting her lips came from behind.

"..... Do you really have to go? You have me, you have Enju, the three of us together are part of the Tendo Civil Security Company."

"..... Sorry, Miss Kisara I ——"

"..... Well, I won't ask, There is one thing I'm concerned about, so I investigated it. Kagetane Hiruko escaped to the 'Outer Area' to summon a Stage V, but he was nearly traced by the news media, at the same time Seitenshi announced a news blackout and blocked all broadcasts."

Rentaro adjusted his tie, while thinking this was very suspicious.

Stage V. If it attacked the Tokyo Area, in the worst case all the humans in the area will be exterminated. Once news of this spreads, the ordinary people would begin to panic. Who could benefit from something like this? So far the opponents have not revealed their cards...

Kisara told herself that as Rentaro finished changing his clothes.

Kisara corrects her posture making the moonlight strike the black background :

"As president of Tendo Civil Security I will do everything in my capacity to stop the Kagetane Hiruko, Kohina pair from summoning a Stage V Gastrea—. Satomi, you must work a hundred times harder than before and I will also work a thousand times harder for it."

"I will definitely stop them, for your sake!"

Part 2

It was 9pm.

Rentaro heard the deep Mud Dauber-like buzzing of the rotors as he looked down at the dark forest. It was the first time he had two helicopter rides in such a short span. The moonlight alone was unable to shine through the forest shrouded in darkness.

As he was struggling to remain alive in the hospital, he was unable to hear the details from Seitenshi herself, but it seemed, from the direction the helicopter was headed, that Kagetane's group was hidden in the Bōsō Peninsula of what was originally the Chiba Prefecture.

The helicopter had just alerted them that they could see the ruins of the New Tokyo International Airport, but it was too vague to be seen. The ruins had probably become a nursery of plant, and Rentaro was not overly enthusiastic about it.

Most of the lands of the Chiba Prefecture, with the exception of the Abiko, Usui and the regions near Tokyo, were not marked under the protection of the Monoliths. The helicopter had already passed through the Monoliths, deemed as International borders, for quite a while, and the surrounding areas were dangerous unventured territories, where the Gastrea roamed contemptuously.

The pair with the original IP rank of 134 was hidden around here. At this moment, the other Civil Security members were also being deported to their respective territories through helicopters and transport carriers.

Rentaro start shaking impatiently while rubbing his palms together.

This was the so-called combined fighting strength, gathered with the aim of hunting them down. It was said, aside from Rentaro, that there were many powerful Civil Security pairs who were involved in this battlefield, and there definitely were some pairs with ranks comparable to Kagetane.

It was highly unlikely that Rentaro would be the first to find Kagetane hiding somewhere and engage him in combat. However, the tension continued to mount as time passed. What exactly was this intangible uneasiness about?

Before he departed, Rentaro made a trip to the University Hospital where Sumire was.

Once the latter saw him, she threw him a large grocery bag. Rentaro stumbled as he caught the bag, and was amazed once he opened it.

“Your backer’s giving you a lot. She said that everything you probably need is inside. Is it enough?”

“Amazing. It’s too much.”

Rentaro thanked the student council president graciously deep inside as he loaded the waist pouch and the holster on the belt, and stuffed all the necessary tools into his pouches. After that, he switched the XD’s barrel to one equip-able with a silencer. He tried shaking it a little, but could not feel any noticeable difference in weight.

The other party had knew Rentaro’s abstinence from Battle Dress Uniforms (BDU), Kevlar and Bulletproof vests, so the appearance modifications and weight increments were minimized.

The Princess of the Shiba Heavy Duty Industries, Miori Shiba, really understood him well.

“Ack, how troublesome. Am I going to thank her next time?”

“She has lofty expectations for you, I suppose. You should show some results as a token of appreciation.”

Rentaro caught the items that were thrown at his chest. Five small syringes were attached together, each containing bright red liquid, with caps on the tips.

“That’s a parting gift from me. It’s something I developed when I was researching on the Gastrea; well, you should understand if I say it’s an AGV experimental drug, I guess?”

Flabbergasted, Rentaro stared at the liquid contained within.

“If possible, don’t use it. There’ll be fewer people visiting this place if you die; I’ll be sad.”

Rentaro did not know how to express his thanks as he stood blankly for a while.

“I have an important suggestion. Wanna hear?”

“Oh, okay.”

Rentaro sat properly, and Sumire gently placed her hands on his shoulders.

"Well… if you have to die, die in a prettier state."

"Huh?"

"If possible, I hope it's by being frozen—no, I dare not expect that much. In such situations, it's better for you to starve to death. I'll introduce turpentine through your corpse's rectum, apply Natron, and put you out to dry.

"A-Are you intending to mummify me and display me in the lab!?"

"You sure have great comprehension ability. You are correct however; relax, I shall put Kisara's panties on your head as a grave good and display you in the most eye-catching corner in this university. Hahahaha."

"Alright, I've decided! If I have to die, I'm going to hug a grenade and blow myself to bits!"

He questioned himself, wondering what kind of threat this was, and once he remembered that he could not simply die like this, he felt gloomy.

"Rentaro, may I add on one thing?"

Sumire sat on the chair and raised her leg. Rentaro in response got ready, mentally preparing himself not to be fooled again.

However, he was mistaken.

"10 years ago, from the moment the Gastrea started pursuing humanity, my world had changed drastically. Bodies lying everywhere, blood flowing everywhere, brains splattered everywhere, no number of sayings can come close to the Hell back then. However, what I did to you back then was unforgivable."

She clutched onto the locket dangling in front of her chest, her body trembling. Rentaro understood that it contained a photo of her lover.

"I was demented back then. I don't know how to make it up to you."

Rentaro hesitated for a little while, and then said,

"Doctor… I never begrudged you once even back then."

Sumire became quiet.

Rentaro glanced at her locket, back at her, wordlessly inserted his XD handgun into his holster, and turned around.

Before he left, he stared at the shelves filled with Western memorabilia, and slowly gave a thumbs-up.

"I-I'll be back."

Sumire was momentarily perplexed, perhaps failing to recognize what Rentaro meant. This caused the latter to be embarrassed, but there was no way he could pretend that nothing had happened, and so he shouted,

"That's why… I-I'll be back!"

The next moment, Sumire was laughing with her hand on her belly.

"He-Hey, are you pretending to be a Hollywood actor? Even if your bad acting is passable, don't say this with that look… be like the good guy who said that line—don't die."

Rentaro suddenly felt his sleeve being tugged at, and this returned him to reality. The sounds of the helicopter rotors immediately rang in his ears.

"What's the matter, Rentaro? Are you thinking of something?"

"No…"

Enju, looking a little bloated in that green flight jacket, was staring at him intently. Her lips had been shut tight since a while back as she twitched her body excitedly.

"Speaking of which, is this the first time you're in the unventured territory?"

Enju nodded. *I see. It's a rare chance to go outside the Monoliths when we've been living inside for so long.* Having realized that he had to support her, Rentaro pulled himself together.

"Anything you want to ask before we begin?"

"What's this helicopter called?"

Rentaro surveyed the inside.

“A few parts have been modified, but it’s more or less the Japanese version of the Black Hawk."

“I know that one! They’re the two piles of scrap we saw in that old movie we borrowed from Sumire. Will this one fall down, Rentaro!?”

Disgruntled, the pilot turned to them.

“Hey, you imbecile! What’re you saying now!?”

Rentaro apologized to the pilot with a glance, and was about to tell Enju off “I say,”, but had to stop once he saw how dispirited Enju was. Perhaps she was trying to ease her anxiety this way.

She had strength far beyond that of a human, but was still a 10 year old. One would sometimes forget this when looking at her. Rentaro decided to be with her until the end and nodded.

“Anything else… you want to ask?”

“Which parts of this helicopter have been modified?”

“The helicopter again? You really like them, huh? This helicopter’s probably equipped with the latest noise reduction rotors.”

Once the conversation ended, the helicopter rotors could be heard buzzing.

“It’s still very noisy, Rentaro.”

“The helicopter has reached a certain height, so the noise should be softer when heard from the ground. Normally, you have to speak louder than this inside the chopper so that you can hear what the other person’s saying.”

Enju however looked confused as she swayed about.

“Why do we have to remove the noise?”

“To avoid waking the Gastrea up. Like us humans, they are a diurnal species, but there are also nocturnal ones who come out at night. If we make too much noise, we’ll alert the nocturnal Gastrea and wake the sleeping diurnal Gastrea up, and that’ll be troublesome. I’ll tell you more later, but when you go down, don’t make too much noise when you move, or something big will happen.”

I see, Enju muttered, and then lifted her head.

"What's that Stage 5 you talked about in the ward room?"

"Oh, about that?"

Rentaro glanced out of the window, and saw a deserted city down below. The windows of the residential blocks showed a small silhouette, probably some sort of animal, or probably something that was originally human.

So this question finally came, he thought.

"Where do I begin… normally, Gastreas begin from Stage 1, and progress to Stage 2, and then Stage 3. In each stage, the size increases, and their skins grow tougher. During that time, they absorb the heredity genetics from all sorts of living organisms, so their bodies will grow all sorts of unique characteristics. This is why there's no one definite way of dealing with Gastreas."

"Yes, I know that."

"I guess so. This Stage 5 is something beyond our understanding of Gastreas. Normally, they'll grow to Stage 4—and probably won't grow any more once they're complete… however, a Stage 5 does exist. Its existence was confirmed 10 years ago, when the Gastrea surged in large numbers on the world. Nobody knows how they're formed, or where they came from, but they're ginormous. Those Stage 4 Gastreas look like kids when compared to it, and their muscles, skins, bones and even internal organs are hardened to prevent them from being crushed by the weight, so they're super hard. The doctor did say that the Gastrea virus is like a designer planning out organisms, but a Stage 5 is akin to an ultimate form."

"But with a Monolith around, no Gastrea forms can enter the Tokyo Area, right? There's no point if it's too big."

"Good question. Here's the problem though; in conclusion, a Stage 5 won't be affected by the magnetic fields released from the Varanium."

Enju widened her eyes; it seemed this intelligent girl had realized it immediately. Humanity had created Monoliths out of Varanium blocks, holed up within like badgers, maintaining a temporal peace for 10 years. There was a possibility of it being destroyed.

"This isn't all. The scary part is that if one of the Monoliths get destroyed by a Stage 5, the Stages 1-4 Gastreas will rush through the destroyed area like an avalanche. In that case…"

Rentaro paused at this point, and in response, Enju gulped as she asked nervously,

"Wh-What'll happen?"

"We'll call this case 'The Great Extinction. It used to happen in the Middle East and Africa before, and to put it simply, it's Hell."

Enju's face paled, and all Rentaro could think in his mind was a chiding voice, wondering how he could scare Enju like this.

He pondered for a little while, and finally shook his head gently. He could no longer treat Enju as a child. She too had the right to correctly understanding the emergency they were in.

"Do you understand now, Enju? Right now, the Tokyo Area is in a battle of survival where it may end up being caught in the Great Extinction. I still find it hard to believe that there's a way for a Stage 5 to be summoned to the Tokyo Area, but if there's such a large-scale operation under the government's command, it's most likely happening. It all started because of that case that was stolen from us, so we have to beat Kagetane's group and prevent it from happening."

"Are there many of those Stage 5s?"

"There're only 11 seen thus far, and miraculously, 2 of them were taken down. The cells completely infected by the Gastrea virus will repair itself and regrow its Telemeres, so theoretically, it is impossible for them to grow old and die. We Civil Security Companies have the ultimate aim of taking down the remaining 9 Stage 5s. No, you can call that humanity's aspiration."

At that point, "We're here", the pilot's voice could be heard. Rentaro then reached his hand to Enju.

"Let's go, Enju. We're going to save the Tokyo Area."

Rentaro looked up at the departing helicopter than had completed its mission, and suddenly felt uneasy. On his next helicopter trip, the operation would either have succeeded, or he would be in a cadaver pouch.

From this point on, he would have to carve his own path alone.

Rentaro's group had landed in a large forest. The towering evergreen lushness, coupled with the night, caused the visibility to be less than stellar. Perhaps the rain over the previous few days had caused the entire stretch of forest to be drenched, and there was a stench of humidity and night roaming in his nostrils.

Leaving this aside, he could not simply stand around like this.

Rentaro went off first, followed by Enju. Rentaro drew the Bush knife from his waist, cutting aside anything that would obstruct Enju behind him.

Enju had powerful regenerative abilities, and a small wound from a twig would be instantly healed; the sensation of pain would remain however, and Rentaro did not want her to be injured.

The 30m tall canopy covered the moonlight, causing the inside of the forest to be extremely dark.

Rentaro had miscalculated the turn of events however, as the map he obtained from before could not be used at all. It was a map from 10 years ago, and he had naturally expected there to be deviance; however, the vegetation, and even the subtle terrain had changed.

He immediately gave up, and was caught in the predicament of having to use a handheld flashlight.

This would certainly notify the enemy Gastreas and Kagetane, whose whereabouts were unknown, of his location, and he was not too willing to use it. However, he was no longer concerned by this.

He twisted the switch cap base, and the 180m long ring of light split the darkness apart, showing all sorts of this. Upon seeing this, Rentaro was left flabbergasted.

The air was chilly, but there were ferns and shrubs, unique only to tropical rainforests extending beyond his line of sight in where the light shone.

There were some twisted trees he had never seen before, reaching its branches entwining themselves on the nearby trees. It was akin to garroting a plant, but he had never seen such plants with red and black patterns.

But the most intriguing of them all was the noises.

A tropical forest near the equator would typically be very noisy at night due to the insects, birds and frogs creating a ruckus of a chorus. However, this artificial forest was shrouded in death-like silence.

"Ren-Rentaro…"

Perhaps Enju too felt intimidated as she clung onto him by the side.

"It's the first time I'm so far away from the Tokyo Area. It's so scary."

In this Gastrea-dominated area, the plants and animals were roaming haphazardly. This however was the first time Rentaro had witnessed such a terrifying thing. Naturally, there should be organisms here yet to be completely corrupted by the Gastrea, and perhaps they had kept their presences hidden to a point where nothing could find them.

"Enju, we'll reach a nearby town when we go by here."

"Didn't they say that we're to look around here?"

Rentaro placed his hand on his chin, and pondered a little.

Currently, the first block of the Tokyo Area should contain the Tactical Headquarters chaired by Seitenshi. It seemed the government officials had intended to lure the pair out through human-wave tactics. As Enju had said, they had briefed Rentaro beforehand, telling him to comb the areas. However, he shook his head.

"No, let's get to the town first. A sane person probably won't want to stay here for too long. Kagetane should be somewhere else."

Enju did not protest too much regarding this.

They proceeded a little forward, and arrived at an open woodland path. The ground below had changed from a soft muddy land to an asphalt ground, and the forest extended to both sides, ostensibly ready to engulf everything. The asphalt floor was completely battered, covered with cracks.

Enju gave an intrigued look as she leapt about on the road.

"This is some sloppy road. The road workers are tax leechers!"

"You see, the roads are a lot frailer than you think without people around. There'll be weeds growing everywhere, cracks occurring, water seeping into

them, and through constant freezing and melting, the cracks will exacerbate. They didn't crack because the administrative people are slacking around."

"I see. Then to put it another way, the politicians are good tax leechers."

"What in the world are you talking about?"

Rentaro gave a wry smile, and then looked up into the sky. The air felt so delicious, perhaps because the oxygen here was rich. Both of them continued down this path, and once they exited the faux tropical rainforest, they finally saw some familiar plants like Metasequoias and Maples. However, the Maple trees were covered with red leaves despite it being early Spring, and the weeds growing at the bottom of the trees were rotten brown like the roots below, giving off a pungent smile.

If one day, Humanity were to finally beat the Gastrea, would they be able to resuscitate such a thoroughly devastated environment?

"Enju. Someone in our industry had said that he found a Quetzal in the unventured areas."

"Quetzal?"

"Right. It's the basis of Osamu Tezuka's "Phoenix", and the male is considered the most beautiful bird in the world. Of course, there's no such bird in Japan, so I always thought it was a lie. But seeing as how the ecosystem is all messed up, I guess maybe that might not be thecase."

"You really like animals, Rentaro. You want to see them?"

Rentaro pouted his lips.

"What, you don't want?"

"That's not it. If you want to see it, Rentaro, I want to see it too. I think it's going to be delicious if it's that beautiful."

"You want to eat it!? That's a mystical bird!!"

At that moment, a howl could be heard from far away, and Rentaro instinctively switched off the flashlight before crouching down.

He whipped out the XD and the one-touch removable silencer from his waist, installed the silencer on the XD's muzzle, and then closely closed in on the sound.

A sound of flowing water could be heard from afar, and for every step he took, the sound got a little louder. Rentaro proceeded forward for a minute, muffling his sounds as he carefully nudged the grass aside.

To his surprise, it was right beside them. Rentaro was momentarily taken aback, and hurriedly ducked in the grass.

The first thing he saw were the sharp eyes giving off a yellow light.

The narrow and long mouth was crammed with fangs, and the sturdy skin was glossy, covering it from head to tail like an armor. It continued to remain there, half its body exposed from the river, and coupled with its sturdy skin, resembled a heavy tank.

"A crocodile. Gavial…? But,"

Unlike alligators or crocodiles, that long narrow mouth was definitely a unique trait of a gavial. Despite this, Rentaro was not very confident of his prognosis.

Its massive size, a side effect of the Gastrea virus, was not something to be surprised by, but it had 5 legs, and 4 eyes besides the original two it had.

The Gastrea virus was not fully potent, and perhaps the gavial became like that due to a mistake in mitosis when the DNA blueprint was designed.

Most of the organisms had features that were somewhat appropriate, and perhaps this could be called the beauty of God's creation; that creature however broke this rule, and one could inadvertently feel fear from seeing it. The long narrow mouth of a gavial is meant to hunt fish, but one would find it difficult to believe that such a massive body can be maintained through hunting river fish alone.

It had discovered Rentaro, and though it showed no signs of attack, it was glancing at him sidelong. Rentaro's palms were oozing sweat at this point.

What do I do? Do I go? Rentaro looked down at his gun.

At this point, the gun was loaded with weakly-loaded subsonic varanium bullets to maximize the silencer's effects, meant to decrease the amount of gunpowder and slow the bullets to below that of sound. He realized that as the crocodile

skin was hardened by the Gastrea virus, the bullet would probably be blocked by the skullcap even if he made a headshot.

Enju tugged at his sleeve, her eyes showing anxiety as she shook her head. Rentaro understood that she was advising him to ignore it.

Rentaro readied his gun and slowly backed away, averting himself from agitating it. The 5-legged Gastrea creature continued to watch them intently with enigmatic thoughts. Once Rentaro's group lost sight of it, they hurriedly ran away, and only after arriving at what seemed to be a safe place did they heave a huge sigh of relief. Rentaro's heart was still racing, and shuddered once he was struck by a sudden chill. They were no longer able to laugh at their weakness anymore.

"You intended to rush out if I hadn't stop you, right?"

Enju grumbled.

Rentaro did not answer.

"Rentaro, you're weaker than me, and yet you want to walk in front of me."

Rentaro calmed down to think, and realized that there were a lot of issues in his actions, ranging from the conservation of ammunition to the risk controls.

Once he considered the consequences of rushing out to try and beat it, he shook his head.

"Sorry, I'll be care—"

But before he could finish, a deep boom shook the air. Rentaro immediately discovered the origin of this noise, and clicked his tongue.

"Those idiot bastards! Some certain Civil Security members probably used some explosives here…actually doing such a thing."

At that moment, a flock of bats, their whereabouts unknown before this, fluttered out from the forest as they let out maddening screeches, circling above them.

Rentaro was terrified. It was the worst possible scenario; the forest had awakened.

A disaster was looming before them. A deep boom different from before rang below them feet; it was the shockwave of a massive body stamping onto the ground.

The noise echoed all around, preventing them from deducing the source.

Another deep boom rang again, permeating through their bodies, causing Rentaro look around hastily. He thought it was a roar from that gavial before, but this noise was more convoluted and ominous.

Enju stared upon an area, her face pale,

"Rentaro…what's that?"

Rentaro looked towards where Enju was staring, but could only see a massive shadow. He switched on the flashlight, and nearly dropped it in his consternation.

A pair of large eyes were glaring at them from the tree crowns.

It was taller than 6m, and had a hideous face and long neck unique to that of reptiles, showing its bright red tongue from time to time. The acne-like goosebumps littered its face, and the foul breath, reeking of rotten flash, strayed leewards towards Rentaro's group.

It was green, and the bones on its arms had evolved into wings. Obviously it was a Gastrea with some avian characteristics.

It was akin to a dragon often mentioned in fairy tales.

Clearly, it was a stage 4 Gastrea—it probably included a few species of birds and reptiles, but at this stage, it would be nearly impossible to figure out the original creatures.

At this moment, Rentaro noticed what looked like cloth scraps on its teeth, and inadvertently groaned. He was aware that there would be casualties in this free-for-all battle the government had been heavily investing into, but he had been consciously avoiding such thoughts in his mind. However,

The dragon, in its frenzy, stamped its right foot on the ground like a sprinter getting ready for a dash.

Rentaro continued to stare at it as he rummaged through his pouches with trembling hands. However, he realized that he did not have any weapon that

could fight such a massive animal. Given its massive size, it would be difficult to fight against it, unless they had a varanium machine gun or an anti-tank rifle.

“Enju, can you carry me and run?”

Enju merely looked at him, indicating yes.

Rentaro watched the dragon cautiously, and he was carried by her. Due to the height difference, it seemed he was leaning on her, but this was not the moment for him to be bothered by such.

“Enju, if you can’t run away, leave me.”

“How can I do that?”

As Enju’s voice rang, a shockwave came sidelong, powerful enough to send people flying.

The chilly winds beat upon his cheeks, and they were lofted while he tried to widen his eyes against the wind pressure. Enju had already jumped up with Rentaro, and had leapt 20m forward.

The hems of her clothes were fluttering as they both remained in the air for a little while. Soon after, she was rushing to the forest in a near-freefall trajectory.

Enju stared at a thick branch, landed both feet on it, and leapt again. This time, she jumped onto a branch 5m away, and leapt again at breakneck speed.

Rentaro was grabbing onto Enju flustered. Whenever she jumped, a powerful G-force would toss him about, nearly causing him to fall.

He looked back, and widened his eyes in shock. The ferocious hunter was leaning forward, crushing the trees and branches; cracking sounds could be heard from the shattered wood as it pursued them relentlessly, and Rentaro nearly let out an outcry in response to this unimaginable pressure.

His eyes were opened slightly as he looked back against the wind.

He however understood that the wings could not be used. Perhaps it could only be used under certain conditions, like an ancient massive dragon or something.

If it had the ability to fly, it would have pursued them by flying. If it were chasing them by ground, it would soon reach its limit. It probably would be unable to shoot fireballs like those dragons in the comic books.

Firmly believing that they could escape, Rentaro clenched his fists.

However, once he saw the front, the sense of despair caused all other thoughts to drift away.

“Enju, it’s a cliff.”

There was a cliff leading to the bottom, and clearly, it was 100m tall from their position to the large forest below.

“Hang onto me, Rentaro!”

“Ack, you serious!?”

Are you joking!? the moment he protested, Enju landed on a branch, bent her knees down, and leapt. At this point, Rentaro nearly bit his tongue.

The scenery passed at a blitzkrieg speed as both of them leapt from the cliff, into the air.

Strong gales blew beyond, and an instantaneous uplift struck them.

The inertia and the ever-present gravity however negated each other as both of them suddenly paused in the air for a little while.

Rentaro opened his mouth slightly.

He looked down, and only saw a forest, a miniature sight. At this moment, he felt his troubles, thoughts, decisions, past experiences were all not worth mentioning, and as he realized how insignificant he was,

He looked forward, and saw that the yellow moon was a lot closer than usual. He reached his hand out for the moon, knowing how foolish it was. He let out a chuckle.

At that moment, there was a curious object 10km away, between the forest and the moon, and this caught Rentaro’s attention as he stared at it.

The narrow and long object was reaching towards the sky. Though the silhouette was insufficient in gauging the distance, it seemed to be almost 2km tall.

—Right, that is the Ladder of Heaven.

At this moment, the terrifying feeling of levitation struck Rentaro. The inertia had dissipated, and the duo's bodies were bogged down by gravity. Rentaro nearly fell away from Enju's back, and hurriedly clung onto her. He gritted his teeth, holding back the cry that was nearly let out.

Enju remained poised as she aimed for two branches while closing into onto the ground. She grabbed one in midair, causing it to snap, and then let go, grabbing another one below.

Enju's slender arms let out a sharp crack due to the excessive burden, but the falling speed was not mitigated in the slightest as they landed in the forest like lightning.

Numerous twigs grazed Rentaro's cheeks, causing blood to ooze out. Enju's feet landed on a rocky land, crushing it and causing it to splatter in every direction. They were tossed aside due to the impact on the ground, and after rolling many times, stopped.

Rentaro stood up, coughing away, and looked up at the cliff he jump fell from.

The dragon was on the distant cliff, circling around the spot a few times as it failed to get its dessert, and after a howl, returned into the forest. Strength was sapped from Rentaro's arms, and as a result, he felt extremely lethargic, and upon relaxing, nearly collapsed as a result.

In the end, Rentaro and Enju only began to move 30 minutes later.

Due to the impact of the fall, Enju's joints were all damaged, and it would take a little while for her to recover. Of course, her recovery speed was astounding fast as compared to the feeble Rentaro.

Renatro had intended to go ahead first and eliminate all the things he had to be wary of. However, he had a change of heart, and decided to let Enju help out too. AS he continued on, Rentaro explained to Enju.

"We need to be wary of the duds, anything from anti-tank mines, bounding mines, guided torpedoes, cluster bombs. These are the things the retreating JSDF team threw during the war against the Gastrea, and they're left around here. Sometimes, they'll cause problems for the Civil Securities headed into unventured areas."

And so Rentaro drew a cylindrical object in the air for Enju to see, indicating that they were to be careful of them.

"Ohh, but why did they ruin the country like that during the war. Didn't they think that the consequences will be troublesome?"

Rentaro was surprised by this logical question, and pondered,

"Yeah…what you said does make sense. Anyway, since they were in despair 10 years ago, humans could do anything. Mines and poisoned gas were just the tip of it…some illegal things were permitted because they were desperate to survive, so nobody had any doubts about that."

Rentaro looked down at the petite girl walking beside him, thought that perhaps this was the difference between the 'Pure Generation' and the 'Robbed Generation' who witnessed the hell 10 years ago, and felt a generation gap.

Enju grinned.

"It's okay, Rentaro. You don't have to worry since you have someone strong in me fighting with you. If the enemy finds us, I'll pick you up and run away."

"Thanks to you, I don't think I'm scared of Jumping Machines anymore."

"That's great. You got to hand it to me then."

Rentaro sighed hard. Clearly, she did not comprehend sarcasm.

"However, I feel a little funny. I feel a little excited ever since I came here."

Enju cusped and opened her palms.

Of course, Rentaro agreed silently. The extent was not massive, but Enju, after being afflicted by the Gastrea virus, would be affected by the Varanium alloy all Gastreas hated. Most of the Initiators would feel temporarily better once they exit the Monoliths, and it was said that some got into a high, with accelerated regeneration to boot.

Both of them continued forward cautiously as they talked. There was still quite some distance from where they left, but as the surrounding forest had been awakened once, it would be better for them to remain cautious.

From time to time, Rentaro would put his ears onto the ground, and let Enju climb to the branches high above to check for danger.

They were obviously slowing down, but they still managed to attain the result of quickly finding a light far away.

It was a small stone cottage, with a wall of sandbags erected at the door.

It was a defense bunker made during the war against the Gastrea, and though it had lost its functions, was tattered all over, it could function as a shelter.

A light came out from within. *Is it Kagetane?* Rentaro felt his pulse race.

He gave Enju some hand signals, pulled his gun out, lowered his back, and approached it from the back, while Enju approached from the front. The sound of wood being cracked could be heard.

It seemed somewhat was burning wood inside. Rentaro leaned his back on the wall, took two deep breaths, and charged in with his gun pointed.

"Don't mind!"

Rentaro's XD was pointing at the other party, who pointed back a shotgun.

Upon seeing the other party, he was at a loss of words.

"You're…"

The person was panting hard, staring at Rentaro with empty eyes.

She was dressed in a plain colored long-sleeved one-piece dress and spats. Clearly, it was not an attire fit for someone moving in the unventured areas; the most noticeable thing was the bleeding heartwrenching teeth-mark wound on the arm, probably induced by a beast's gnaw.

Rentaro recognized the girl in front of him.

"If you don't put your gun down, I'm going to kick your brains out."

Enju gave this chilly threat as she wordlessly went behind the girl, putting her legs on the latter.

"Wait Enju. She's not an enemy."

"Eh…"

Enju exchanged a few glances between Rentaro and the girl, before letting go unwillingly. Rentaro then moved towards the girl as the latter fell limp on the floor; he crouched down, and exchanged looks with her.

"I say, we met at the Ministry of Defense. Do you remember me?"

“Yes, of course.”

The girl panted hard as she answered.

“I’ll help you stop your bleeding and bandage you. Talk later.”

Suddenly, Rentaro realized that Enju was looking at him with gritted teeth.

“Wait–a moment, I don’t know this woman at all. Explain your relationship with her, Rentaro.”

He turned to Enju.

“I see. So it’s the first time you’re seeing her, Enju. This person’s an Initiator partner of a promoter called Syogen Ikuma.”

Part 3

The fire flared once the collected dried wood was thrown into it, dyeing the wall an orange yellow in its ecstasy.

Rentaro stopped her bleeding through first aid, disinfected the wound, and bandaged it. By the grace of the Gastrea virus, the wound was starting to heal, but her regeneration speed was a lot slower than Enju.

Rentaro decided to let Enju keep watch, for he was wary of any enemies prowling around. However, the latter pouted unhappily, “I don’t want to recognize such a woman!” “That sort of wound can heal in 3 minutes!” she said emphatically before storming out of the bunker. *3 minutes? That’s impossible—* Rentaro wanted to refute back, but decided to drop the matter upon seeing how unhappy she was.

It seemed her name was Kayo Senju, and Rentaro was startled to realize this was the first time he learnt of 'the hungry girl' name.

“It seemed I infuriated your partner greatly.”

The girl spoke with exceptional calm, and Rentaro turned towards where Enju left.

“Hm, I wonder why she’s suddenly being so pouty. Has she reached the stage of adolescence rebellion?”

“I think the reason is obvious…”

The tone in her voice had ostensibly abandoned all emotions into the air, and the stoicism and poise this girl exhibited was unfitting of her age, which troubled Rentaro. It was hard to decipher her emotions.

He had assumed she was someone with a sense of humor when he met her at the Ministry of Defense. Perhaps he was mistaken?

“Am I weird?”

Once he realized he was staring at her, Rentaro looked aside.

“It’s nothing. Nothing at all…”

The girl closed her eyes, and placed her hands on her chest.

“Please do not mind. I am already used to being treated by others like this. I too am of the First Generation of ‘Cursed Children’, but as I inherit the genetic codes of dolphins, my intelligence and memory is higher than those of ordinary Initiators. On a side note, my IQ is at 210.”

Rentaro was shocked.

“More than twice of mine!?”

“But it may be a little outdated. It was the result of the intelligence test I took when I was young.”

She was being so humble despite being a young child. Rentaro was overwhelmed by this inexplicable sense of defeat.

“So you’re in charge of command and rearguard since you’re the brains, and Syogen’s the vanguard? It’s rare to see such a combination.”

“Mr Syogen’s body and even his mind are all brawny. He has no patience, so he is inapt at doing the unglamorous work of backup support. He is still fuming that we did not manage to claim the share from the jobs we have yet to fight. It is troubling that his thinking is has yet to change.”

She bent the twig into two, and threw them into the fire.

Her overtly frank explanation surprised Rentaro. The latter looked over at the shotgun beside her.

“Let me check your shotgun.”

She pondered for a while,

“What if I say no?”

"Fine by me. So be it, if you don't feel anything about being saved."

Kayo snorted, ostensibly having given up, and handed her gun over.

"I learnt something new. Those that ask to repay the favour are fallen."

Rentaro pretended not to hear as he checked the barrel. Kayo had brought along an automatic shotgun with a silencer equipped, loaded with a 20mm rail for mounting parts, and a grenade launcher attachment. These were all part of the Shiba Heavy Industries' year 2027 model.

Rentaro pushed the grenade launcher attachment aside, and frowned once he saw what was inside the chamber. He lifted his head, and stared at the girl.

"Why did you use explosives in the forest? This is a 40mm empty grenade shell!"

Because of this, Rentaro's group was pursued by a stage 4 to the brink of death. A golden rule when roaming the unventured territories would be to not let out any sounds no matter what. This is all the more clear to the Initiator ranked far higher than Rentaro.

Kayo cupped her slender knees as she stared at the bonfire for a while.

"Mr Syogen and I were caught in a trap. We got injured, and now we're moving separately."

"Trap

"Right. We landed in the forest, but after a proceeding for a while, we saw a flickering light deep inside. We approached it, thinking that it was an ally."

She embraced her knees forcefully, ostensibly shrinking her range.

If I had paid attention, I would have known that nobody would use that pale blue light. It was like a ghost light."

Rentaro gulped.

"What's that?"

"…What was that?"

Kayo glanced at Rentaro, and then looked away.

"At first, I sensed stench. We smelled a powerful stench, like something was rotting, and a large number of flies gathering there. That Gastrea was covered with blooming, terrifying flowers, glowing at its tail. It shuddered when it saw us, like it was delighted. I've seen all sorts of Gastreas, but that one caused me to shiver. I thought I was a goner, and threw a grenade; while we were being pursued, I got separated from Mr Syogen. That was the moment when I got bitten. Luckily, the virus injected into me was minimal; it does not seem to affect my body."

Rentaro had his hand on his chin as he listened to Kayo's words.

"That thing's probably a firefly-type Gastrea."

"Firefly?"

"Right. Fireflies mostly feed on pollen and nectar, but you know, there're some savage, carnivorous fireflies. They mimic the way the other fireflies give off light, and feast on any fireflies that approaches. It probably is a uniquely evolved glowing Gastrea that was created to lure and feast on humans. You guys were completely fooled by it. The plants on it are probably rye plants; I heard some would give off a pungent, rotting odor of urine and rotting flesh to attract flies and other forms of insects, and use them to spread the pollen…that's a stench that probably would lure people in. It's rare to see a Gastrea mixed with plant genetics; I guess, given that it has evolved to this extent, that it's a stage 3."

Kayo widened her eyes.

"Is that actually possible?"

"This is how the Gastrea has routinely beaten us. There's no way humanity can lose to foolish animals."

Kayo was silent. However, she immediately relaxed her expression, and gently sighed,

"I did not expect you to be so accurate on a Gastrea-type you never seen before, Mr Satomi. You certainly are a biology nerd."

"Erk…don't mention that."

"You seemed to have gone through a pitiful childhood phase, feeling ecstasy in drowning an ant hive in water, something like 'Drown now. This is Noah's flood. Have a taste of God's rage~'? Yes, I do understand how enjoyable it is."

"Ah yes yes!! I'm a murderer!! I'm sorry now okay!!?"

For the first time, Kayo looked delighted, narrowed her eyes, and stared at the bonfire.

"It is really nice though. With a Promoter like you around, I will not feel bored in any ways. I do envy Miss Enju a little."

Rentaro pretended to be nonchalant as he asked,

"Are you happy being with a Promoter like that Syogen Ikuma?"

"Initiators are tools of murder. Nothing more, nothing less."

Kayo did not answer Rentaro's question.

"I suppose Miss Enju has never killed before. I can tell from her eyes."

"…That's correct. Have you?"

"Hm. I killed a Civil Security pair I met as I came here."

For an instant, Rentaro assumed that his hearing was faulty.

"Why did you do that…!?"

"That was Mr Syogen's orders. In fact, he would have done if they had been coming along when lured by the firefly's light, he would have stayed by and done the same thing. My Syogen had said, 'we're not letting anyone else get the bounty of killing that mad bastard of a masked man'."

Rentaro clenched his fists.

"Don't you have any feelings about killing people?"

"I was scared. My hands were trembling. That was all that is however. If I count this once, it would be the second time already. I want to get used to it immediately."

Rentaro felt his rage rise within him, and before he realized it, he had already pushed Kayo down, and was on her.

"Don't joke around with me! The scariest thing about killing is about getting used to killing! When someone kills another person and knows that he's going to get off scot-free, that person will gradually lose his sense of guilt!"

"Are you saying this because you had killed before? Your eyes are mysterious, Mr Satomi. It seems that you have a complicated past. Your eyes are gentle, yet terrifying."

"…I say. Do you know why our Enju would speak with such an arrogant tone? That's because she thinks of herself as someone doing the noble job of protecting humanity; she can say whatever she wants with her head held high. It sounds simple, right? She once nearly killed a fallen Promoter, a criminal. She was gloomy when the operation was going on, and yet was delighted when she learned that he was saved, and even visited him. I think that is sufficient."

"Mr Satomi…that is a wonderful act."

Kayo's enigmatic words were looking up at Rentaro, and the orange flames of the bonfire shone in her eyes.

Rentaro slowly got up, and turned his back on her.

"Sorry for the outlandish words I just said. Argh."

"Why must you apologize?"

She tugged at the hem of Rentaro's uniform.

"Eh?"

"Why must you apologize? You are correct, Mr Satomi. Please be more confident in yourself. The me of now is confused; I am not fully certain of my own feelings. I can think of dozens of reasons to refute your claims, but I do not want to deny your words…this is the first time I have such an experience."

"You…"

An inexpressible emotion surged to his chest.

His initial expression of her was not wrong after all. She immediately wiped her eyes gently with her sleeve, and at that instance, the weakness of a 10 year old girl he chanced upon was nowhere to be see.

"Do you wish for something to drink?" Once she said this, Kayo took out a boiler and instant coffee from her bag, and proceeded to heat the water.

Rentaro heard the weak cackling of the wood as he looked up at the ceiling. He could see the night sky from the holes in the crumbling bunker, as a crescent

moon glowed in it. He looked around the bunker, and found there were rusted small firearms left behind, probably caused by the JSDF during the War.

Rentaro picked up an ammunition case left beside a 9mm machine pistol, and placed it on the fire. Under the glow of the orange light, the brass glossed amidst the rust and stains.

"You know what this is? It's a 9mm Parabellum. Parabellum here means—"

"—I know. This is Latin, and has the meaning of 'Prepare for War'. Right?"

Rentaro glanced at Kayo.

"I guess that's to be expected for someone with an IQ of 210. You really know everything, huh? Right, it originates from the phrase Si vis pacem, para bellum, meaning 'If you want peace, prepare for war'."

Kayo poured the coffee into a paper cup, and handed it over to Rentaro. The latter felt his palms heat up, and Kayo was holding hers with both hands, blowing onto her coffee."

"So this is what it means to prepare for war? Scatter large number of mines all over the unventured areas, lots of duds, and in the end, we merely get a mini garden that is far from the peace we talk about."

"The generation back then didn't care. During these 10 years though, humanity has managed to recover successfully."

"Has this generation really managed to recover completely?"

For some reason, Rentaro was taken aback by Kayo's words.

"Why you ask?"

"I do not understand the 'Pure Generation' that had fought against the Gastrea. However, I do see the bare hatred of those in the 'Robbed Generation' who witnessed their children devoured; their lovers become ugly Gastrea beings. All I see among humanity are mass productions of weapons that kill many. The 'Ladder of Heaven', for example."

Rentaro looked towards where Kayo pointed, and saw an object piercing through the clouds.

"This is the tip of the iceberg. I suppose you have heard of the 'New Human Creation Plan', Mr Satomi? It was said to be a plan that was eliminated once people realized the high combat abilities us Cursed Children possess. However, there was once an experiment to create the strongest soldiers using Varanium. It was said that they went through human modifications too; this certainly is something unimaginable for Japan even before the War."

Rentaro remained unmoved as he listened to Kayo. The latter paused, and took a sip of coffee.

"However, I always thought it was an urban legend until I met Kagetane Hiruko."

"Those that use such power are cowards."

"Mr Satomi?"

Rentaro did not know what to say and tried to pretend nothing happened by taking a sip of coffee. The bitterness spreading on his tongue caused him to inadvertently frown.

At that moment, a gruff male voice could be heard amidst the noise from the black receiver, scaring the duo.

It seemed to be from a wireless radio. Kayo leapt over to it, twisted what seemed to be a knob, and the voice got clearer. Soon, the unforgettable man's voice could be heard.

"Alive…Hey! Answer back if you're still not alive!"

Kayo gave a glance, probably indicating for Rentaro not to speak up. The latter nodded slightly, understanding that it would be awkward to explain why he was with her.

"I was worried that I could not contact you, Mr Syogen. It is great that you are alive."

"You need to ask? I got better news, Kayo!"

Syogen pretentiously left things hanging, and Rentaro could imagine him giggling madly under the skull scarf on the other side of the wireless radio.

"We found that masked bastard."

Rentaro and Kayo exchanged looks.

“Where?”

Rentaro pulled out the map from his pocket and laid it out on the floor. They were able to immediately decipher the location Syogen had stated; *the seaside town? It’s near.*

“Right now, the nearby Civil Securities are gathered together, ready to strike them. I wanted to go ahead of them, but they’re ranked higher than us, and most importantly, my Initiator’s not around. The issue about the bounty’s finally settled; they say they want to share it equally, hot gutless. Anyway, hurry up and meet up with us.”

Syogen hung up on the wireless radio without hearing Kayo’s answer. There were shrill noises and laughter coming from behind, so it seemed the assault plan he talked about was real.

Kayo immediately packed her belongings quickly, and put out the flames.

“You’re going?”

“Yes. Though he is like this, he is still my partner. What about you, Mr Satomi?”

Rentaro was not certain of his emotions. As other Civil Securities were going to handle this situation, he really wanted to rely on them.

He had acted cool in Kisara’s face before this, but it was merely more than a day since that incident, and he could not forget the terror of nearly dying at the hands of Kagetane..

He shook his head slightly. He had to go.

He suppressed his personal feelings as he calmly analyzed the situation.

The issue was the number of people working with Syogen. Their ranks were unknown; it seemed from the chatter that there were many pairs, at least 10 of them or so. Amongst them was Syogen Ikuma, the fighting god whose IP rank was at 1584, who could fight despite the absence of his Initiator.

It would certainly be an intense battle, no matter which side wins.

“How’s your hand?”

Kayo silently undid her bandage to reveal the completely healed wound.

Rentaro turned towards the town. In conclusion, he had to witness the end of this battle.

4am.

Rentaro called Enju back in, and the trio left the bunker.

Enju, who had been keeping watch outside for a long time, had gotten used to night visibility more than Rentaro and Kayo, who had taken shelter and kept warm around the bonfire. Thus, Rentaro chose to let her lead.

They arrived at the edge of the forest after walking for a while, and they chanced upon the flatlands, the field of vision open in front of them. They would be able to enter the town if they proceeded down the path for another few kilometers, but Rentaro's group decided to take a detour up the hill.

There was no cover from their location till the town, and Rentaro concluded that they had to be cautious.

The smell of the tide filled their noses as they walked on. The sea was nearby.

On the way, they found trails of a night camp in a high place surrounded with wild grass.

There were no signs of cooking, probably due to a fear of smoke rising. However, there were packets of rations scattered everywhere; it seemed the number of participants was more than what they had expected.

Rentaro started to feel anxious; since they had planned an assault, it would be elementary for them to attack no matter whether it was night or day. It would be daylight in another 2 hours; since they had left this place, one could assume that the battle had started.

He cautiously detoured about as he walked up this hill, which allowed him to spy upon the town. Below his sights was an eerily quiet town.

There were countless fishing and small boats docked at the crescent port.

This small town was probably plagued by the issue of underpopulation before the War. Rentaro had originally assumed that there would be no light, but there was one light in a building, ostensibly a Church. Was that the place?

The gunshots suddenly rang, causing Rentaro to gasp. The breaking gunshots, starting from the first, continued to ring together with the clashing of swords. It had begun,

“Rentaro!”

Enju yelled.

“Right. We’re going.”

“I am staying here.”

Flabbergasted, Rentaro turned back to find Kayo’s back turned away from him.

‘Why?”

The instant he spoke, a 4-legged beast rushed out like a bullet from the path they had just came from.

Kayo clashed with it head on, exerting her strength, and stopped the enemy’s charge.

Rentaro was surprised. The onrushing enemy was a Deer-type Gastrea, with horns poking from its peeled skin all over the upper body.

Kayo was stabbed by several of them, but forcefully jammed the shotgun into the Gastrea’s mouth, and squeezed the trigger.

“GAHH!!” It let out a terrifying scream as it was sent flying, and remained lifeless.

Though she was bleeding in the abdomen, she turned around, pretending that nothing had happened.

“It seems we were followed. Have you not heard them, Mr Rentaro? If nobody is here to stop them, we will all be annihilated no matter whether we win or lose.”

Rentaro looked upon once he heard her say this. There were buzzings and hisses coming from the lush forest they had just walked out from. The Gastreas had been awakened by the gunshots in town, and were exchanging messages amongst their allies through all sorts of frequencies.

Kayo looked extremely calm as she stabbed the auto shotgun into the ground, put her backpack down, and laid out all the spare magazines. She was preparing to fight a war of attrition against them, and as she did this, the wounds on her hands and abdomen were regenerating.

"We too will—"

Kayo placed the shotgun on her shoulder and fired at the sky. It seemed that shot had taken out a few enemies, as a few monstrous avian being-like shadows crowed as they fell to the forest.

"—Are you a fool, Mr Rentaro? The die is cast. You need to cross the Rubicon. I will head over to your assistance once I am done with here. I shall leave the rest to you."

Rentaro closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and exhaled it. It was true that an outstanding commander had to make snap decisions within 5 seconds to respond to the ever-changing situations of battle.

"I'll leave the rest to you. Stop the Gastrea, but don't force yourself."

"You do not have to worry. Once I am disadvantaged, I shall run away. I will leave Mr Syogen to you."

"Got it. Let's go, Enju."

"Right, got it."

Rentaro started running, and the town slowly got bigger in his eyes. It seemed, from how intact the residences and small buildings were intact, that the people living here had long evacuated to Tokyo before they were attacked by the Gastrea.

However, it was not completely intact. The residences and buildings, long devoid of any use of the heaters, were affected by the effects of mechanical weathering, and the continual expansions and contractions caused the walls to be ultimately dilapidated. This town was also subjected to the erosion of the salt-rich sea breeze, further exacerbating the situation.

Rentaro stared at the scenes of this desolated town, clearly realizing the fragileness of human architecture.

The countless number of boats docked were all rusty, and the fishing boats were deformed into weird things that could be assumed as ghost ships. Whenever a breeze occurred, the black shadows would let out cackling sounds.

The pair slowly approached the location of the gunshots, and Rentaro's heart was beating wildly; his skin, as sensitive as a radar, would prick whenever the wind blew.

What exactly was the situation? The gunshots and sword clashes from before had vanished. If they had beaten Kagetane, someone would have cheered for joy. Why was it so tranquil?

Be careful, Rentaro Satomi.

Rentaro removed the silencer, which was getting in the way, and held the XD handgun in his right hand, his left holding a flashlight. He crossed his arms, raising them like a guard as he proceeded forward. Till this point, he still could not switch on his flashlight, for if he were to shine directly at someone, he would rob that person's line of sight, and that person would fire upon him. This is the CQB technique used by a Professional called Harris.

Soon after, his leg hit something, and Enju fumbled about as she picked it up. After she groaned, she threw it away.

It was a freshly chopped arm, still holding onto a rifle, blood dripping from its severed point. It seemed like it would be giving off heart.

Soon upon, he heard a thud in the one-storey house, and nearly fired at it.

"Sword…my sword…where is it?"

"You're…Syogen…Ikuma?"

The man wearing a skull scarf on his head was lying limp on the stool of a convenience stall, and trudged towards them once he saw them. It seemed he could not see anything.

"Sorry. Do…you know…where my sword is? I can still fight, if I have that…"

Rentaro's mouth was slightly agape as he stared at the severed broadsword that was stabbed into Syogen's back for quite a while. Syogen passed by Rentaro, knelt on the floor, coughed out a large amount of blood, and collapsed.

He never twitched after that.

The situation was far beyond Rentaro's expectations, and this delayed his mental thinking.

Syogen,dead? The Initiator ranked 1584 was dead?

He gripped the handle of the XD, and apologized to Kayo in his heart.

He found the spare gun equipped on Syogen's waist, and did a brief check on it. It was an automatic handgun from the Manufacturer Smith and Wesson, the Sigma; after confirming that it was loaded with .40 Cal Varanium bullets, he put it on his belt, stood up, and stopped at a corner.

"We're going onto the road, Enju. Don't scream no matter what you see, okay?"

"There's something scarier than this, Rentaro?"

Rentaro did not answer. Due to the headwind, they had scented upon the thick, foul odor of blood.

Rentaro rushed onto the road with his gun point. Enju gasped.

"Rentaro…what exactly is…this?"

The nearest item to them was several meters away.

It was the severed head of an Initiator, the face of shock and horror staring at them.

The corpses of Initiators and Promoters in front were piled together. These were the ones who were shot down immediately; the road had become a lake of blood, and the faces he recognized at the Ministry of Defense could be seen amongst them.

He could see, 100m ahead, a Church with its doors ajar.

The candle altars hanging on the wall lit the area, and the Holy Cross at the roof of the Church overlooked this infernal scene coldly.

"Papa, it's shocking. They're really alive."

At this moment, they heard a familiar voice from the trestle, and looked back.

The pair was standing in front of it, staring at the sea.

One of them was dressed in a black one-piece dress, a pair of swords hanging on her waist. The other was an enigmatic man, dressed in a tuxedo, a mask and a top hat.

Rentaro was skeptical of what he saw; the pair took on a massive number of experts, and remained unscathed even after fighting against so many experts.

A strong sense of regret struck him, and he took a step back.

Why did he not choose to standby and wait for other Civil Security members for support? Clearly, after fighting against the enemy so many times, he had fully realized those superhuman abilities the enemy had. Even if that was not the case, one could have predicted the winner just by seeing how Syogen Ikuma was killed without having a chance to fight back. He could have dropped tail and ran away that time; he missed out on two opportunities, and got involved in the worst case scenario. At this point, there was no way he could run away.

“Kagetane…where’s the case…!!?”

“I knew you would come after all.”

The fresh breeze rustled his flush, and Hiruko Kagetane, dual-wielding handguns, basked under the moonlight as he calmly turned around, opening his arms gracefully.

“The curtain has drawn upon us. Let us settle this, young Rentaro.”

BLACK BULLET CHAPTER 04

第四章
神を目指した者たち

Those Who Aimed to be Gods

Part 1

4.10am.

An electronic eye quietly hovered 800m above the confrontation between Rentaro Satomi and Kagetane Hiruko, spying on them.

The Japan National Security Council's (JNSC) Command Headquarters was located in Tokyo's Area 1, where the real-time data collected from the scouting Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) were displayed on the monitors in the meeting room.

The Operations Headquarters was engulfed in sombre silence.

The Cabinet Secretariat and the Defense Minister were seated at the edge of the conference table, glancing at each other apprehensively.

They had just witnessed the footage of 14 pairs and 1 man, 29 Civil Securities in all, take on Kagetane Hiruko, only to be completely annihilated.

The current visual was a top-view image of two pairs facing off silently against each other, a fight that was ready to break out anytime.

Seitenshi sighed as she sat at the JNSC Chief seat, staring at the Defense Minister.

"Are there any other Civil Securities nearby?"

"Well, I suppose that the nearest pair from them will only reach an hour later or so."

The Defense Minister, whose face resembled that of a bulldog, was at his wits end as he covered his face with a napkin.

He turned towards the Vice-Chairman, Kikunojyo Tendo, who nodded with a sturdy face .

"Lady Seitenshi, please make the decision."

Seitenshi pondered for a while, and stood up.

"Then—"

Suddenly, there were the hollers of the security guards standing-by outside the meeting room.

The doors were shoved open, and several men barged in. Once Seitenshi saw the girl standing in the front, she was speechless.

“What’s going on?”

The black-haired girl standing at the front of the pack was Kisara Tendo, chairperson of the Tendo Civil Security company, who haughtily strolled into the room right when the meeting was at its boiling point, laying a piece of paper in front of the people seated.

There was a circle drawn on it, and a handwritten name and seal were on the outside, like a joint letter.

Seitenshi gasped once she saw this. It was an agreement, written in the form of a circle. In the past, when the common folks united together to revolt, they would sign their names in a circle to hide the identity of the main conspirator.

The stares were all directed at one of the countless names on it—that of the Defense Minister’s. The other high ranking officials paled as they backed away from him.

“Hello there, Senator Kutsuwada.”

“Wha-What kind of a joke is this?”

“Your subordinate had quite an interesting thing here. Your name is signed on this common agreement, which means that you’re the backer supporting Kagetane Hiruko’s actions from the shadows. You’re the one who commanded them to steal the “Legacy of Seven Stars”, and you were ready to leak this news to the media too.”

“I-Impossible…”

Kisara placed her hand at her chin, and deliberately tilted her head,

“Your methods are really old-fashioned, signing a common agreement in a circle. However, it’s thanks to this that I’m able to save the hassle and catch everyone in one fell swoop.”

Seitenshi narrowed her eyes. There was no way she could allow the other party to prattle on.

“This conference is highly classified, purposed for National Defense. It's troubling that you are trespassing.”

“Th-That’s right. You’re merely one of the filthy Civil Security dogs! I don’t know where you got it from, but scram from here!”

The Minister barked as he followed up on Seitenshi’s words, but Kisara merely gave him a cold look.

“What Lady Seitenshi said is exactly what I expected, but I felt anxious once I found out about this. I hurried here because I think you need to know the truth. You won’t be able to carry out the meeting in peace if you don’t remove the mole, right?”

Kisara skilfully rebutted. In response, Seitenshi indicated her intent to Kikunoyo, and the latter gave the Defense Minister a cold look.

“Take him away.”

“I-Impossible…Lord Tendo. I…I!!”

The escorts grabbed him by the arms and dragged him out of the conference room as he pleaded and sobbed to no avail.

“I shall make my leave then.”

“That will not do, Chairman Tendo.”

Kisara stopped in her tracks and turned around.

“Why?”

“Your reasons?”

“I am sorry, but you are not permitted to leave this building until this operation has succeeded. There is a need to detain you in this room.”

At that instant, Kisara placed her hand at her chin.

“I suppose there’s no other choice if that the case.”

“Kisara…you actually showed your face here.”

Kikunojyo showed a seething expression, and Kisara merely made a nonchalant smile at him.

"It's been a while, Lord Tendo."

"Have you come back from hell, you vengeful spirit?"

"I merely came here to clean up the cockroaches scuttling around, and it's simply a coincidence that he was here. Aren't you worrying too much about it?"

"You cheeky little…"

Kisara narrowed her eyes, showing an icy glint.

"All the 'Tendos' must die, Lord Tendo."

"Y-You…"

This certainly did not resemble a conversation between grandfather and granddaughter, and Seitenshi was somewhat petrified by this, as she had a certain level of understanding regarding their relationship.

"Both of you are to stop here for now. Chairman Tendo, since you have seen the monitor, I suppose you have some understanding of the situation. I would like to hear your suggestion. Will that be fine?"

4.15am

A warm wind grazed Rentaro's skin.

His nose reeked of pungent sea salt, and the sounds of the tides fading and soaring, smashing against the concrete wharfs resounded. The moonlight that reflected off the surface was glittering like silvery scales, but the bottom could not be seen, for it was overly dark.

The stench of blood was mixed in, and corpses were piled up like a hill. The two death gods however remained on the ends of the wharf.

Rentaro looked at the carnage shown around him, and hissed,

"You guys did all this?"

"We did all we could, for we do not wish to stain the Church. The Stage 5 Gastrea shall arrive, and we simply need to wait for it."

"…Is the case inside the Church? If we go in and ruin all your preparations, I guess we'll be able to prevent a Stage 5 from being summoned?"

"That is impossible however, for we are standing in your way."

"We'll just beat you then."

Kagetane shrugged and laughed,

"I am the one who shall destroy the world. Nobody can stop me."

"…Chairman Tendo, what do you think are the chances of the Satomi pair winning?"

Kisara showed an icy, aloof expression as she placed her hand under her chin.

"30%, I suppose. If my expectations are included in this equation…then they'll definitely win."

The Chief Cabinet Secretary started laughing away, clearly sneering at such tomfoolery.

"Chairman Tendo, I do understand your belief in your subordinates' ability. However, 29 Civil Securities were slaughtered just a moment ago, and they're facing a survivor of the "New Human Creation Plan". There's no chance, let alone a 1% chance of them winning?"

"A survivor? You must be mistaken, Chief Secretary."

"Huh?"

"I shall not elaborate on the details, Chief Secretary, but 10 years ago, a little while after Satomi was taken in, stray Gastreas entered my residence and gnawed my parents to death. Because of that, my recurring diabetes worsened, and my kidneys nearly failed."

The Chief Secretary was not certain of what she was getting at exactly, and looked flabbergasted,

"That's certainly an unfortunate past, but what exactly—"

"—Satomi protected me back then, and had his right side eaten away, his left eye gorged out. He was on the brink of death, and sent to Section 22. The Surgeon was the premier doctor of her generation, Dr Sumire Muroto."

"Sumire Muroto, you say? Is he—"

Seitenshi felt that it was time, and turned to her side.

“Mr Kikunojyo, please show them his specifications.”

Rentaro stared forward intently. The enemy he needed to beat was right in front of him.

He silently closed his eyes, rolled up the hems of his right arm and leg, and reached his arm forward.

“I’m going to stop you…for the sake of those you killed, for Miss Kisara and Enju—Kagetane Hiruko, I’ll definitely stop you!”

There was a creaking sound, and cracks appeared on his right arm and hand. The ductile artificial skin made of synthetic rubber and silica gel rolled backwards as it peeled off, and landed beside his feet.

“Impossible!”

The Chief Secretary, upon seeing the information, exclaimed as he stood up, scratching his head as he showed fear and embarrassment.

“How’s that possible…such a thing…there’s still another one? Another human weapon created during the Gastrea War?”

Rentaro’s right arm and right leg quickly showed the color of black chrome from the shoulder and groin respectively. The reverse spikes-like pores started to writhe, ostensibly having minds on their own. Once Rentaro opened his eyes, his field of vision was widened, and the colors were brightened. The prosthetic eye was connected to his vision, expanding his sights. It seemed to be able to catch sight of any object in 3 dimension.

The nano-core of the graphene transistor installed in the prosthetic eye was activated, and the simulation began. Several patterns appeared on the revolving black eyeball, the interior of the nose quivered, releasing a myriad of flavors within.

Kagetane Hiruko shuddered a little.

“Varanium prosthetics, huh…Young Satomi, are you...?”

Rentaro leisurely raised his head.

“I’ll introduce myself here too, Kagetane. I’m Rentaro Satomi, former member of the Ground Self-Defense Forces, Eastern Army, 787th Mechanized Special Forces.”

The metal used for prosthetic limbs and eye is Super Varanium, an amalgam of rare and ordinary metals with Varanium as the base, created under zero gravity. It’s an alloy for the next generation, having several times the hardness and melting point of ordinary Varanium. Section 16 which Hiruko Kagetane belonged to had the battle philosophy of an absolute defense, a repulsion field that can stop a Stage 4’s attacks. Section 22 which Satomi belonged to had the opposite philosophy; the 10 rounds in the arm and 15 rounds in the leg are meant to create thrust, a superhuman level of attack power—these are the personal armaments of the soldiers involved in the “New Human Creation Plan”, created to help humanity bury the Gastrea.

Kagetane opened his arms wide, and let out a shrill laughter.

“I see, I see! So that's how it is! I liked you at first sight, but I never thought we were the same type! Heehee! Ahahahaa!!”

Enju let out an anguished groan.

“Rentaro, didn’t you say that you wouldn't use that again—”

“It’s fine…it’s fine. You should settle your grudge rather than worry about this. It’s not like you to keep losing to someone else, right?”

Enju glared sharply at Kohina, and nodded firmly.

The black eyes of both Enju and Kohina glowed a bright, fiery red almost at the same time as they released their powers.

“I really have to thank Kagetane Hiruko.”

Kisara continued sternly.

“No matter how I kicked his butt over this year, he just wouldn’t use that thing. He really hates himself, actually. Right now, he’s really angry; I’ve only seen him like that once, and I won’t be able to predict what’ll happen next.”

Seitenshi stood up, looked around, and said.

“Does everyone understand the meaning of this battle now? The battle between Rentaro Satomi and Kagetane Hiruko can be said to be that between the strongest spear and the strongest shield. This however will not bring about a paradox; in this battle, no effort will be spared, and one pair will definitely die—please fight on, Mr Satomi. Prove that you are the strongest.”

“You have to win, Satomi…please.”

Seitenshi overheard Kisara’s shivering voice as the latter clasped her hands together.

The frigid night breeze blew by, ruffling Rentaro’s uniform. The atmosphere was tense, and one would feel sinful just by breathing the air.

He dug the soles of his feet into the dirt, and removed his necktie, as he was tormented by the sweat-inducing and suffocating will to fight. The enemy was serious, for he was still unscathed after taking the combined attacks from that many Civil Securities.

Kagetane Hiruko got into position. He drew the 2 fully-automatic Berettas from his holsters, activated the bayonet units hidden within them, and spread his arms wide. Kohina too readied her short swords in a 6 o’clock manner, one pointing up, and the other pointing down. The swords and guns were perpendicular to each other, reflecting the moonlight unevenly in the form of a Cross for the dead, engraving the might of God on all who were about to die.

“Do you understand what it means to challenge me, who was formerly ranked 134, Young Satomi?”

Rentaro too positioned himself quietly. The Tendo Technique ‘100 Endless Potentials’ signified an existence of infinity, a streamlined style of attack and defense conformed into one.

“…Don’t worry, I do understand this very well, Kagetane. I was defeated twice, my allies were all killed, no other allies will come—this isn’t something I hoped for in the first place, you bastard! I’m going to eliminate you once the battle starts!”

That was the signal to begin the battle.

Rentaro took a step forward, whereas Kagetane struck first. He swung his arm out, ostensibly sweeping it across.

“Maximum Pain—pulverize!!”

A blueish-white field appeared in the form of a fan, swooping towards Rentaro at an astounding speed.

“—Tendo Style, Type 1, Number 3!”

An explosion could be heard, and on the exo-structure on Rentaro’s arm, starting from the elbow, the ejection installation spun around, ejecting the depleted golden ammunition.

“‘Rokuro Kabuto’!”

With the additional thrust from the cartridge, Rentaro accelerated, releasing a bullet punch as he charged in with the intention to pin his opponent onto the wall, and break through it. There was an explosion at the point of impact; both sides were blown away as their shoes left marks on the ground.

“You broke through Maximum Pain…?”

“That’s not all!”

Kagetane suddenly knelt over, coughing out blood. He wiped the mouth area of his mask, and seemed startled as he stared at the blood flowing out.

“Papa!”

“The field can’t completely negate the damage?...ho ho, haha, ahahahaha!!”

Kagetane spun on his toes and spread his arms wide.

“Interesting. How interesting it is, Young Satomi! I feel pain, I’m still alive! What a wonderful life! Hallelujah!”

Kohina, who seemed to have vanished from their sights just a moment ago, immediately appeared between Rentaro and Enju. She whimpered beside them, “Don’t bully papa!!!”

With short swords in hand, Kohina spun around like a dancer. Her swordsmanship could only be described as haphazard, whether it was her ability to quickly close a distance of 10m, or the quick slashing.

The sounds of weapons clashing could be heard, and of course, Kohina was the one looking surprised this time.

Enju blocked the right sword with her sole, while the left sword was blocked by Rentaro's prosthetic arm.

Rentaro's prosthetic eye had an amplifier device designed to track the enemy's current position, movement velocity, and simulate the path of movement.

He continued to lock weapons with her, and drew the XD handgun from the holster with his other hand.

However, Enju knocked into him before he could squeeze the trigger. The impact was so strong that Rentaro nearly puked, but he seemingly understood her intention once he saw dust swirling after an explosion where he stood a moment ago. Kagetane had fired upon them from the pier using his Berettas.

Enju carried Rentaro and jumped towards the sea, leaping from one docked ship to another like a hare. The bullets gave chase, pelting the ships they were on, and sank them.

Rentaro was startled by the duress of the massive G-force. His guns could only fire at a single point, and it would be pointless to fire at full automatic if the enemy was not within 5m. He was already having difficulties trying to keep up with Enju's movements, but he was in the abnormal situation of having to control the recoil of his guns while doing that.

Enju leapt high, aiming for a row of warehouses, and patted Rentaro on the shoulder twice to indicate that she was letting go. In less than a second, the latter again experienced the sensation of floating that he was already used to. The fall was 5m high, so he negated the impact with his right leg, and quickly ducked behind a warehouse nearby. Once he completed his escape in such a swift manner, he racked his brains, observing his surroundings. It was an area filled with abandoned heavy machines and metal cargo containers; naturally, they were all littered with rust marks, caused by the baptism of the sea breeze, for there were no humans in this unventured area.

He leaned his back on the container and took a deep breath. Then, he leapt from the blind side, and fired his XD back at Kagetane's living body. The sharp recoil caused his arm to jump, as the 40 caliber Varanium bullets were fired, and the depleted ammunition danced on the floor. It was an established tactic in a tag fight to kill the Promoter, the one in command first.

However, Rentaro experienced a third shock.

The bullets vanished along with an atypical sound of a bell being shattered. Kohina suddenly appeared beside Kagetane, and after several seconds, Rentaro realized that she had deflected them with her blades.

His feet were trembling. *What kind of a joke is this?*

He continued to fire, but the bullets were parried one after another as crisp sounds could be heard, as if making a mockery of him. She continued to spin like a top, and she was ostensibly dancing as she used her blades to deflect the bullets.

Kohina continued to spin as she wielded her blades, to a point where her head had ostensibly stopped moving.

"Impossible…"

Behind her, Kagetane lifted his mask, bit onto one of his depleted guns, and leisurely walked over as he swapped the magazine with his empty hand. The darkness shrouded the face behind the mask, and nothing could be seen. The sea breeze lifted the hem of the tuxedo, causing him to look exceptionally huge. He showed no signs of activating the Imaginary Gimmick.

Enju paled as she approached Rentaro, and the latter closed his eyes, racking his brains.

"…Enju, how long can you hold Kagetane off?"

Rentaro turned towards Enju and asked her. The latter stared at him worriedly, but she then looked at him unflinchingly in the eyes. "I can beat him in 10 seconds!" Once she said this, she shot out like a rocket, exhibiting the super acceleration abilities of a Model Rabbit. Kohina stood forward to intercept, but Enju slid past her slashes and charged at Kagetane.

Having realized Enju's intentions a tad later, Kohina gave a spiteful look, but immediately charged towards Rentaro.

Both rooks were charging towards the undefended generals with all their might. In this scenario, the battle had become a case of which Initiator would take down the opponent faster.

For Kagetane, Enju would not be an easy foe to deal with. However, the same would apply to Rentaro.

Kohina kept her body parallel to the ground as she bolted like a bullet. The simulation installation in Rentaro's prosthetic eye was giving off sparks, and a burn-like aching could be felt from under his eyelid. With much difficulty, he managed to predict her technique's trajectory.

He nudged his body to dodge the first strike, and activated his Varanium right punch at the second blade aimed at his lower body.

—Now!

One could hear an explosion as the golden depleted ammunition was spun and ejected.

—Tendo Style, Type 1, Number 3.

"'Rokuro Kabuto'!"

"Slice!"

The fist and Kohina's blades swung at blinding speed, causing both sides to clash.

The shockwave caused the dirt on the ground to swirl, and both Rentaro and Kohina were knocked back as their soles rubbed heavily against the ground. Rentaro was the first to break the deadlock as he fired his XD while closing in. Kohina swung her blades as she knocked down the 40 calibers, causing shrieks of metal to ring.

Rentaro closed the distance as he fired, but they were merely 3m away from each other, and his shots hadn't landed on the dual-wielding swordsman even once.

In his impulsiveness, he aimed at the head instead of the body. However, he regretted this decision to a point of hysteria, for Kohina had waited for this moment, and tilted her head slightly to dodge the bullet before charging into Rentaro's clutches. He felt his neck stiffen once he realized that he was lured in by her.

The blades could not be seen, and in response to the alacritous lunge, a burning sensation occurred in the prosthetic eye as the simulation began. Rentaro dodged the lunge thanks to his instincts, and tucked the blade under his armpit to lock the enemy's arm. He bent down, did a judo lock on Kohina's leg, and looked ready to turn his waist.

However, the enemy was no slouch, as Kohina immediately broke free from Rentaro's arm through brute force. She then stepped on the latter's back, leapt, and yanked the sword out, scarring the underside of his arm. For an instant, Rentaro was skeptical of what he saw, for her petite body leapt 5m.

Once he predicted her landing position however, it was his turn to shout,

"Up there, Enju!"

Enju, who had been fighting on even grounds against Kagetane, hurriedly did a backflip to dodge, and retreated quite a distance. Kohina fell from above at an astounding speed, stabbing through the position Enju was at.

"Wail, Sodomy. Sing, Gospel!"

Kagetane's two handguns let rip a spinning saw-like buzzing as they let out flares. One of the shots hit Enju in the left arm as she was retreating.

"Ah!"

Due to the direct hit from the 9mm bullet, the arm was knocked to the top-left side.

"Enju, get down!"

In less than a second, Rentaro reloaded the XD.

He drew the Sigma handgun in his left hand and pointed it at Kohina, whilst the XD in his right was pointed at Kagetane. The guns were paired together at the last moment, and once he crossed his arms, he squeezed the triggers. His arms then released muzzle flares, resembling fireworks in the night, and the tremendous recoil caused his arms to jolt back.

Kohina danced as she knocked the bullets away with her blades, while Kagetane merely murmured something. Once Rentaro realized it was the activation of the Imaginary Gimmick, the wall of blueish-white phosphorus light deflected Rentaro's bullets away one after another, creating loud noises in the process.

The Sigma in Rentaro's left arm was out of ammunition, and Rentaro threw the gun aside. He reached into his pouch, drew a round cylinder made of steel, pulled the pin out, and threw it. Kohina continued to slash at everything that came her way, and for the first time, Kagetane yelled,

"Watch out, Kohina. That is—"

—A trap.

2 seconds later, the steel cylinder exploded in front of Kohina, scattering the darkness aside.

A flashbang.

A 170 dB explosion of noise was coupled with 2 million Candelas of light. If this were to be used in compact indoor situations, the compressed shockwaves during the explosion would cause a vibration that may impair hearing, and the flash that is released would be brighter than sunlight.

“Aahh!”

Kohina covered her eyes as she screamed and twitched her body about. This had a sufficiently numbing effect on Kagetane too, and Enju did not let go of the opportunity presented.

The girl with hare-like feet instantly closed the distance, stamping her left foot hard into the ground, causing it to collapse instantly.

Kohina immediately crossed her short swords together to protect her body, and Enju’s kick landed directly over there. The powerful kick to the midsection could shatter a thin steel plate, and was not slowed down even after shattering a Varanium short sword as Enju sent Kohina flying from the pier, causing a large splash as the latter bounced for approximately 20m before sinking into the water.

“Rentaro!”

Rentaro was already running before that however, as he leapt towards the man in the tuxedo. Before Kagetane could aim his gun at Rentaro, the striker located at the cartridge base on the sole of Rentaro’s foot was fired. The ejection installation, located along what seemed to be a nervous system, caught the depleted ammunition and ejected it; Rentaro’s foot swung with a bang at breakneck velocity, and Enju timed her movements as she matched his.

Rentaro and Enju exchanged glances, and used the Tendo Technique Type 2, Number 24—

“'Hidden Zen. Mysterious White Cave'!”

“HAAA!”

The two kicks were released at an explosive speed, and before they landed on Kagetane, the blueish-white phosphorous light blocked them, and the tremendous impact caused the surrounding air to be blown aside. Kagetane flew from the pier into the water and sunk within, while Rentaro as he continued to fire his XD at the landing spot, depleted all his ammunition in three shots. In this silent night, the sound of water crashing at the shore was the only thing to be heard.

At this point, Rentaro found himself gasping for breath, panting briskly.

He held the guns by the grip hard, ostensibly praying. His breathing was starting to ease.

“Enju.”

He knelt down in front of Enju, lying on the ground, to check her wounds, and immediately frowned.

Blood continued to flow from Enju’s wound, and there was no sign of any regeneration. The Varanium bullets would prevent any Gastrea's wound from recovering, and this concept applied for Initiators as well, for they too were blessed by the Gastrea virus, and their wounds would typically heal. Due to the effects of the Varanium weapons and ammunition however, she showed the same fragility as that of a normal human.

With tears in her eyes, Enju curled her lips.

“I-I’m fine!”

Rentaro then slapped Enju on the head.

“Ouch!”

“Alright? Yeah right, you idiot. You’re still acting tough.”

Enju turned to the water surface.

“Have we defeated him?”

Rentaro turned his head around, walked to the edge of the harbor, and stared at the black water surface. He cautiously fished out a spare magazine from his pouch to reload his XD pistol. Though it seemed like he did not break through the Imaginary Gimmick, it would not be surprising if the impact from before

managed to crush the caster's insides, and even if he was not killed, he was probably unable to battle.

—It was because of this notion that Rentaro was startled when an arm rose from the water and grabbed his leg, and he was unable to react.

Enju's wails vanished in an instant as Rentaro was dragged into the water with tremendous force, causing the icy seawater and darkness to fill his eyes and nostrils. He nearly screamed once he spotted the white mask merely millimeters away from him. The hand grabbing onto Rentaro's feet glowed, and Rentaro fidgeted about as he struggled.

He aimed the XD at the enemy and fired from up close. He managed to hit Kagetane's shoulder, but the fingers, etched deeply into his skin, did not let go. One misfortune happened after another; though the empty XD cartridge could be ejected successfully, the sliding mechanism was jammed.

Now in a tight spot, Rentaro fired the cartridges in his prosthetics like explosives. Small explosions occurred in the water, and his sight was filled with white bubbles as he was sent flying. The impact nearly blasted his arm and leg aside, and he was unable to open his eyes. He felt an inexplicable floating sensation afterwards, and lost all sense of direction as he clumsily flailed his limbs. His back slammed into something hard as he was unable to defend himself, and the sharp pain devoured all the air in his lungs. He was unable to understand what had happened exactly.

The splattering sounds of rain entered his ears as it pelted upon him. He opened his quivering eyelids, and saw the repulsively clear starry sky.

He was lying on the deck of a small fishing boat. The recoil from the cartridges in his arm and leg probably sent him flying out to the surface, and he landed on the ship as a result. What he originally assumed as rain was actually the water that was sent flying along with him.

He placed his hands on the deck to support his body as he spat the seawater he drank, and wiped his lips with his sleeve. His clothes, soaked in water, were heavy, clinging onto his skin uneasily. *Where exactly did Kagetane go?*

Rentaro's sights suddenly sank. He thought his knee had knelt forward, but his soles were standing on the deck.

A chill suddenly rushed down his back. He found a fishing boat docked 2m in front, and unsteadily made his way through as he did a jump after a running start. His instincts were telling him that he should not linger around.

His boots leapt over the black sea surface, and landed on the deck again. As he expected, he saw something that made him skeptical.

There were ripples on the sea, and the waves were divided into two sides, forming two loud, long and wide waterfalls.

One could see waste tyres covered in algae and moss 8m below the sea level. The boat Rentaro was on sank headfirst in a pitiful state, wailing in the process.

Rentaro was shivering in fear, as he rubbed his shoulders over and over again.

The pair dressed in tuxedo and the black one-piece dress were below, looking up at Rentaro from the bottom of the sea. They were damaged; one of Kohina's blades was shattered, Kagetane was hit in the shoulder, and his lost his 'Psychedelic Gospel'—however, they were far from the state of being unable to battle, and lingering in their sharp eyes was the will, the intent to continue the fight. This was the flame of willpower, these were the high ranked personnel.

Rentaro threw his XD aside and retreated. His mind could not comprehend the fact that the repulsion field had just divided the sea.

"What're you doing, Rentaro?"

Enju suddenly appeared as she tugged at Rentaro's arm, leapt, and landed on the deck of the largest ship docked at the pier. There were a few tables with parasols attached to them on it; perhaps it was originally a café or something.

Soon after, Kagetane, carried by Kohina on the shoulder, leapt onto the stage.

Rage could be felt coming from behind the mask, as he pointed his arm forward, clenching his fist.

"Why must you get in my way!? Why? We people of the New Human Creation Plan were born to kill. Once the Monoliths collapse, the war against Gastrea will happen again, and we shall gain our raison d'être. Hatred will never end, wars will continue! We shall be needed by others again! Do you not understand, Young Satomi? To us soldiers of the New Human Creation Plan, our victory lies in the endless war against the Gastrea!"

Rentaro felt the impact of a hammer being slammed on his head.

"You bastard…is that all you want…!?"

"So what? The extinction of humanity is merely a triviality. Nobody will want us if there is no war! Begin wars! Start more conflicts! This is a war born for me, simply for me! I will never let anyone else get in my way!"

"After all that blood you shed, you still want to continue killing?"

"This is a grand experiment! All those who easily died by my hands are ultimately unable to survive in the utopia I dream of. How did the people around your Initiator react when she was revealed to be a 'Cursed Child'? Did they give their blessings? Did their cries of victory make you relieved? Did they delightfully accept her? That is impossible! I am chosen. Kohina is also chosen! You are also chosen. You should be able to understand my thoughts. Come over, Rentaro. I will give you whatever you want. Come with me."

"What kind of a sick joke is this, you bastard!! I definitely won't allow the future you speak of!"

"Then, die!"

Once Enju saw Kagetane aim his gun at them, she charged forward, only to be intercepted by Kohina, who read her movements completely. The blade was swinging at Enju horizontally, and whilst she immediately blocked it with the sole, Kohina immediately barged with her shoulder. Enju was left unbalanced as she was only standing on one leg, and Kohina grabbed that leg, spun like a giant spring, and threw her at Rentaro. Kagetane aimed his handgun at them, and Rentaro was startled.

Varanium bullets are bad for her. Rentaro caught Enju immediately, and spun around.

"Cry, Sodomy!"

The 9mm Varanium bullets zipped through the air, pinging into Rentaro's back, causing the latter to jolt like he was electrocuted.

"Rentaro!"

The immense pain caused him to grit his teeth. He was alive, not killed immediately. He reached his hand for his waist, drew the plastic syringes that were attached together, removed a cap with his mouth, and administered the drug by stabbing it into his abdomen.

"If possible, don't use it." Sumire's voice rang in his mind.

His heart jolted, and his body experienced a tremendous amount of heat, giving the impression that his limbs were expanding. His wounds were starting to heal as the sounds of flesh sizzling could be heard, and the bullets embedded in him were pushed out.

This was the AGV experimental drug, a medicine Sumire created when researching on the Gastrea that allowed humans to recover almost instantaneously. This dramatic effect was much more potent than the regeneration-inhibitive effects of Varanium.

Sumire could have been a famous person with her name in the history textbooks for this, if it wasn't for the side effects of this drug—a high failure rate of 20% that caused the testers to turn into Gastrea creatures.

Rentaro won this bet, and he flexed his hand and swung his arm. There were no anomalies, and no signs of him becoming a Gastrea.

Kagetane continued to squeeze the trigger of the fully-automatic Berettas, and Rentaro raised his hands to protect his head and arm, acting as a shield for Enju. He felt a tremendous impact of his body being pierced through, and blood splattered everywhere. All the bullets hit him, but they were immediately removed from his body soon after being embedded within.

Rentaro was secretly smirking away though his face was contorted in pain. *With this—*

However, that arrogance of his lasted a mere few seconds.

As his arms were raised to defend himself, he did not realize in time that Kagetane had approached him. *A close-ranged fight? For what reason?* Kagetane merely placed his hand on Rentaro's flank casually.

"—It is over. I shall now show you my ultimate skill."

Kagetane's voice rang out deep within Rentaro's skull.

"'Endless Scream'."

At that instant, a distressing impact permeated from the fingertips to the head, and his body floated for an instant.

"Eh…?"

The repulsion field took the form of a giant spear as it stabbed through Rentaro's abdomen.

The spear was pulled out suddenly, and Rentaro stumbled a bit. His right flank had completely vanished, and the circle etched by the large force-field made a clean wound on his body. Rentaro could see the severed edges of his ribs, his internal organs leaking out. He tentatively placed his hand on his abdomen, but blood continued to gush, as his organs and intestines were spilling out.

"I-Impossi…sible…"

Rentaro coughed out blood as his knees fell onto the ground. He turned his head to look at Enju, who had her hands covering her mouth, and reached his hand out to the stoic-looking Kagetane Hiruko, ostensibly wanting to grab him. Kagetane drew a cross in front of his chest.

"You lost."

Rentaro was already falling forward before he sensed the ground closing in on him. His blood was slowly covering the deck, and his dying state was reflected on it as his limbs were twitching without control.

After much anticipation, the physical wounds did not heal as he expected. Despite the AGV drug clearly showing effects, it seemed unable to deal with such a massive hole. Rentaro's cells were having difficulty withstanding the pain, and had already given up on its owner.

Darkness loomed from all directions, and a striking loneliness struck like water.

Enju was shaking his body frantically, tears overflowing in abundance as she hollered at him, yet he was unable to hear what she said.

Kohina kicked Enju in the chin as the latter lifted her head, and Enju was sent sprawling along with the café tables and parasols. Kagetane aimed his handgun at Enju's head, and murmured.

Is he going to kill Enju? When she lost her will to fight?

Enju showed no intention on defending herself as she reached her hand out to Rentaro.

And Rentaro in return felt his heart being dug out.

"…!"

He could not hear, he could not hear Enju's voice. He understood that the icy hand of the death god was reaching out from his wound.

"!"

His consciousness was dissipating, and he was groveling into the abyss. His heavy eyelids were trembling.

Enju continued to whimper, and her voice suddenly echoed in his ears.

"—Don't die, Rentaro. Nothing has begun yet. Please—don't leave me alone."

—*Bump.* Rentaro's heart throbbed, and he suddenly widened his eyes.

His right hand darted, and he used his fingers to pick the remaining 4 AGV experimental drugs, pulled off the caps with his mouth, and stabbed all 4 syringes into his abdomen.

His chest creaked slightly, instantly it expanded greatly, and his bones let out an abnormal sound. His body was convulsing, heating up, and he felt a shiver, the feeling of queasiness was rising wildly. The hole in his abdomen was rumbling, and then—a regeneration that shocked even Enju began.

His blood was spilling out, his flesh protruding, his intestines dangling, his nerves in catenation, his body temperature falling, his bones rebuilding, his cells being destroyed and regenerated.

The insides of Rentaro's body had changed drastically from a dying state to one alive and well. His organs were wincing, ostensibly churned, causing him to roll about in agony, slamming his head into the deck like a madman. Then—

"—ARRRGGGHHHH!!!"

He howled to the sky as he stood up, missing a few steps as he nearly slipped on the blood that was gathered. His vision was contorted, swaying to and fro, and his sense of distance was obliterated, his world filled with the sight of a drunken man. However, he could still see the death god he had to defeat.

His body was boiling, ostensibly burning. He felt extremely nauseous, dizzy and queasy. Personally, he was still incredulous at the fact that he was still alive and standing.

However, his hands were still moving, and so were his legs; he was still alive.

Kagetane opened his mouth slightly, rooted,

"Young Satomi. What exactly…"

He glared savagely at his sworn enemy, and got into position, readying the 'Emerald Water and Sky Style'. The clear sea and sky formed a blue scenery, the boundary nowhere in sight. This was an offensive style that ignored all forms of defense.

Rentaro exhaled some hot air, which scattered along with the wind in the form of white mist. He closed his eyes, and then opened them slowly.

He then stamped hard into the ground; an explosion could be heard from his leg, and empty ammunition was ejected. The mobile thrusters on the leg turned towards the back, and the thrust came from his sole. He endured the splitting pain on his body as he instantly closed in on the opponent. Kohina was first to react as she immediately leapt over.

"Slash!"

"Scram!"

Rentaro used his right arm to block the blade that was swung at full force. An explosion could be heard, and 3 empty shells were ejected from the arm, causing the stinging scent of gunpowder to enter his nostrils. Kohina's eyes were widened greatly.

It was the Tendo Technique, Type 1, Number 8 'Flame Fan Burst'.

The fist collided with the short sword again, and a tremendous impact permeated across his body.

The fist, made of Super Varanium, crushed the remaining short sword into bits, and sent Kohina flying like tissue paper. She ricocheted off the deck, crashed through the wall of the steering room, and hit the apparatus within the room, causing a concussion as she fainted on the wall.

Rentaro did not stop in his tracks as he fired off the rounds in his leg, accelerating again with breakneck pace as he shot through a torrent of bullets.

The hem of Kagetane's tuxedo rose as he crouched down.

“Endless—”

“Tendo Style, Type 1, Number 15—”

Kagetane turned around, threw his gun, reached his right hand to the back and got ready to draw his spear. At the same time, empty rounds were ejected from Rentaro’s right arm, and he swung an uppercut at breathtaking speed, as if he was scooping.

“—Scream!”

“—‘Unebi Koryu’!”

The glowing spear clashed with Rentaro’s fist, causing a thunderous boom that shook the night sky.

The sturdy fist with unrivaled hardness clashed furiously with the blueish-white spear that could deflect an anti-tank rifle shot, causing the surroundings to be bright as day.

Rentaro gritted his teeth, and his feet, ingrained firmly onto the deck, sank along with it as the boards nearby were peeled and tossed aside. The bitter taste of adrenaline lingered in his mouth.

His arm was gradually being pushed back by the invincible spear, and he was sweating in fear.

“HAAA!”

Rentaro hollered as he continued to fire the ammunition right when they were compacted together. The first shot pushed the spear aside, and after the second, his arm clearly entered the spear.

On the 3rd shot—he suddenly felt his arm being pushed forward abruptly. He swung a supersonic uppercut amidst the deafening explosions, sending Kagetane flying 10m into the air, along with the spear as the latter clearly looked confounded.

Rentaro turned the thrusters to the back, leapt to a similar height as Kagetane’s, spun 180 degrees in the air once he was at the apex, turned his head down, and fired the remaining rounds in his leg.

Tendo Style, Type 2, Number 11—”

In an instant, everything slowed down.

The ammunition spun out, and the golden empty shells entered his sights in slow-mo, falling like rain. As he basked in the midst of the depleted rounds, he exchanged looks with Kagetane, the latter let out a hoarse voice, ostensibly having given up.

"I see…I lost, to you…?"

A ruffling could be heard, and the flow of time reverted to normal.

It was time to bet everything.

"Hidden Zen, Weeping Shore, Ultimate Burst!—fall!"

He swung an overhead kick, dealing a judgment of heaven and earth. The Super Varanium toes pierced through Kagetane's field, crushing his lungs, and broke a few ribs as he was sent flying. Like a stone thrown on the water, Kagetane's body bounced off the sea surface at a startling rate, flew through two boats docked at the bay, went on for more than 100m, and created tsunami-like pillars of water before sinking.

Rentaro could not negate the power from his own body when he executed this move as he continued to spin and fall, his back landing heavily on the floor. He then jumped up immediately and cautiously observed the sea.

10, 20 seconds passed. His prosthetics were frothing with steam due to the large caliber rounds fired in rapid succession, and the enemy continued to sink.

He exhaled slightly, and turned to smile at Enju.

"Alright, we won, Enju. Yahoo!"

Enju opened her mouth greatly, looking startled.

"How…papa, papaa…"

Rentaro turned towards the source of the voice, and saw Kohina give a look of despair as her knees were on the floor.

Enju gave a perplexed look as she stared at Rentaro, and the latter nodded at her,

"She's not our enemy anymore."

At this moment, his chest pocket vibrated, giving off an utterly bland electronic sound.

"So you're still alive, Satomi."

Rentaro knew who the caller was from her voice. It was elegant, gentle yet confident; he felt tears well in her eyes.

"It's over. I won as per our promise, Kisara."

"I saw it, but there's a bad news I have to tell you."

"Bad news?"

Kisara hissed, a rarity for her,

"Listen to me calmly—a Stage 5 Gastrea has appeared."

"Eh?"

Rentaro asked softly with skepticism as the surreal words passed through his head.

The Tokyo Area was doomed. Everyone would be killed. He could not save anyone.

Part 2

Kisara added that it was currently going on.

From what she said, the JNSC Conference was euphoric over the defeat of Kagetane, only to pale when news of an approaching Stage 5 broke out.

Once the abnormally sized Gastrea revealed its head as it invaded the Tokyo Bay, the missiles, poison gas and torpedoes were fired in unison. However, the missiles and torpedoes merely caused minor damages on it, which it quickly regenerated from. The poison gas used was the vilest of them all, the VX poison gas; however, the Gastrea virus immediately decomposed it once it was absorbed, and created new antibodies as resistance. The normally reliable Varanium anti-armor missiles merely bounced off the overly rigid Gastrea armor.

Kisara surmised that the conference room had fallen into panic.

From the pier, Rentaro stared at the horizon of the Tokyo Bay. There were certainly lights and sounds of what seemed to be explosions amidst this night. The battle had begun.

From her tone, it seemed that Kisara was invited to the JNSC situation room for some particular reason.

There had been frenzied roars and shrieks from Kisara's side for quite a while, and people were growling at each other. It was merely a matter of time before some people would start running away.

"Is it all over? No hope left for the Tokyo Area?"

Rentaro closed his eyes tightly, ostensibly praying as he awaited her answer.

Very soon however, she answered with her usual imperious tone,

"It's still early to give up. I just asked Lady Seitenshi whether the plan I thought of can worked, and she said it's possible."

"There's a way? Wh-what do I do?"

"I can see Enju and you from here. The answer's to your south-east."

Upon hearing this, Rentaro turned his head. Once he understood her intent, he was left gobsmacked.

Are you…that's impossible, Miss Kisara. No way can I do that.

There were 2 rails, each 1.5km long, paved 70 degrees into the sky, probing through the thin clouds. It was impossible to see its apex from here, for the clouds were blocking.

It was a relic of the later times of the Gastrea War—a Superweapon that was completed, but was forced to be abandoned along with the bases before it could be tested, and had witnessed the defeat of humanity.

It was commonly dubbed the "Ladder of Heaven".

Its other name however was the Linear Superelectromagnet Launch Installation—a railgun module that could shoot any metallic flying objects, less than 800mm in diameter, at sublight speed.

"You two are the closest to the target. There's no time left, Satomi. You're the only one who can do it."

The lights in the installation suddenly lit up in unison the moment Rentaro's pair approached.

10 years worth of electricity had been pumped in through the local power grids.

There were husky power cables buried underground, shielded as a result; it had yet to be damaged by the Gastreas ravaging the lands, so it could still withstand the duress of operating 10 years till now.

The facility was built on slightly high ground, and the surroundings was littered with lush forests.

The pure white wall was built with spikes on them, standing tall as it ostensibly refused any intruders. Unfortunately for it, it did not consider a girl's hare-like jumping ability.

Enju carried Rentaro on her back and easily leapt into the premises.

Both of them had an overview of the entire premise for an instant while in midair. The massive 'Ladder of Heaven' was supported by countless pillars at the base, and right around it was a cylindrical object approximately 100m diameter attached to it—probably some form of storage battery.

However, the neighboring research facilities, as compared to the fascinating rail module beside it, did not seem any bigger than the Magata High School Rentaro attended.

Rentaro glanced at the layout sent to him on the phone, and immediately understood the secrets behind it.

The anthill facility extends underground, and the shown structure was merely the tip of the iceburg."

"Hurry, Satomi."

Rentaro and Enju were racing through the facility. The internal structure was overly complicated, probably to prevent any guerrillas from overrunning it. They were looking for a room in the second basement, and with Kisara leading him, Rentaro huffed and puffed his way to the Computer Room.

The domed room was spacious within, computers scattered everywhere. The large EL panel at the front appeared in their eyes, and astonishingly, there was no speck of dust despite it being abandoned for 10 years.

Rentaro leapt to the control panel, ostensibly ramming his way in, pulled the external port, and attached it to his cellphone. He was then requested to enter a 20-digit password, which caused him to panic, but Kisara' voice remained calm and poised across the phone.

There was another voice besides Kisara's, and it seemed that Kisara was made to supervise the operation. It was likely that Seitenshi was with her, or maybe even beside her, relaying the necessary information.

The password was easily entered, the green bar loaded, and the linkup was complete. Theere was a transmission of data between the facility and the headquarters.

"There's no anomaly with the power output of the unmanned transformer, no issues with the power grid either. The dewar flask used for storing liquid helium is fine, functioning. We'll handle the firing sequence from here."

Rentaro felt uneasy as the other side grasped the situation with the facility.

Kisara's voice sounded distant, and the progress of transmission towards the headquarters was slow. At first, Rentaro assumed that the data was massive, but it seemed to be an issue regarding the electromagnetic waves. The reason for

this was because the phone, which made use of the satellite, was not within range. This was why there was no sign of the data being transmitted.

Rentaro had a bad premonition about this. If he were to break connection with Kisara, it would all be over.

An alarm rang in the facility right when the transmission was under way, and a synthesized female voice echoed.

"The linear superelectromagnetic launching installation's beginning. All interlock personnel at the superconductor flywheel generator are to evacuate immediately. Currently headed into 1st phase, charging energy."

There was a circular indicator on the right side of the panel, indicating the level of charge.

The touch panel was moving rapidly despite him not touching it at all. This was because it was being controlled from afar at the headquarters.

The joystick-like thing hidden in the control panel suddenly stood up seemingly, and was pulled to the front by an invisible hand before being pushed back again. This rhythimic action was akin to a vehicle's tires being changed.

Rentaro gulped. He could sense the agitation from the people on Kisara's side, and only at this point did he realize that it was neither a lie or a joke; they were fighting for the survival of the Tokyo Area.

Suddenly, they felt a rumbling from deep below, and lost their footing.

Rentaro watched the visuals on the front panels, and saw that the "Ladder of Heaven", tilted 70 degrees from the ground, was rumbling at the base as it gradually moved.

However, it was moving extremely slowly, ostensibly marching on the spot.

Soon afterwards, it was almost on ground level, and 2 tripods of 6 'legs' were added to the two sides of the rail, stabbing into the ground at an astounding speed as it cleaved the land apart, leveling the hill before stopping. These were the claws meant to withstand the recoil.

"Switching to online mode, connecting to the satellite. 'CYCLOPS' system activated. Main monitor showing the target.

The 3 panels at the front were switched, and once he saw the enlarged visual on it, Rentaro nearly looked away instinctively.

One had to wonder how many thousands of genes existed in that that living creature.

The dark brown skin, cracked thoroughly, was littered with warts as if it was afflicted with smallpox, and there were humps on it. 8 long scythes with reverse hooks were poking out from its own, on the neck, head, right eye.

The target's head was exceptionally big, and the curved beak-shaped was poking out from its mouth. The remaining left eye was pitifully small.

Shown on the panels was a bipedal, hulking giant.

In terms of the scale, the giant was almost 400m. It divided the sea as it continued forward, swinging its scythe-like tentacle strenuously at the missiles gliding through the night. The continuous explosions evaporated the surrounding seawater, but there was no visible damage on it.

Enju stared at the monitor blankly, and turned to Rentaro with a pale expression,

"Re-Rentaro. That's?"

"…A Stage 5, the name is Zodiace Gastrea Scorpion. It's one of the guys that caused the world to be in turmoil 10 years ago."

The name was originally a codename both the US Defense Ministry and the Japanese government gave, but unknowingly became commonplace amongst the people such that it had become a household name, and now a common name for them.

Rentaro clenched his fists as he stared at this terrifying envoy of death.

Once a whale in the sea ends up ashore, it would be crushed to death by its own weight. Naturally, this should apply to a body several times larger.

For a moment, the scene seemed so surreal. One had to wonder how strong the body had to be to support the massive weight of this moving Gastrea. It probably was stronger than any possible material in the world.

In this case, there was no way they could kill it with any existing weapon.

The scorpion suddenly stopped in its tracks; its tentacles covering all over its body stood up, and it pointed its massive beak at the sky. In the next instant, Rentaro was cursing at the fact that this fact contained a voice receiver.

"HOOOOOOOOOOOWWWLLL!!!"

The monster was a turbulence of noise, ostensibly quivering the atmosphere of Japan. The quake-like tremor caused the facility to shake, causing him to release some sticky sweat.

The outburst was filled with rage.

Rentaro's teeth were clattering, and he was in no mood to groan.

"Are you listening there? Stop spacing out, Satomi."

Kisara's chiding caused Rentaro to recover in shock, her voice clearly tinted with anxiety and frustration.

"Listen to me calmly, Satomi. We've a problem. There's no Varanium piercing shell to be loaded."

"Wh-What's going on?"

"There's nothing that can be used as a bullet! In that case…we can't…use it. But…to pr…"

Kisara's voice could be heard no longer as it was inaudibly soft. Unsure of what was going on, he pressed his cellphone to his ear.

"Miss Kisara? Kisara? What's going on? Miss Kisara!?"

Rentaro looked around, and once he suddenly saw the flying images on the control panel, he felt the blood drained from his face. The indicator bar showing the transmission progress of the data suddenly stopped. The transmission of the data had ceased.

"Right now, we can't control it from here…it's definitely because of the superconductor…magnetic field…it's up to you…Satomi…"

The voice was fragmented, but Rentaro could understand what she was trying to say, and he grabbed the cellphone for his dear life as he hollered,

"Miss Kisara! I don't wanna do this! Stop, don't do this! I can't do it! Please don't leave me alone!"

"Satomi…we'll leave…the world to……."

A beep could be heard as the line was cleared. Dumbfounded, Rentaro stared at the phone.

A chilly aura then engulfed him, but that was not the worst situation.

A sudden noise rang, and he lifted his head. He saw the status indicator shown on the left panel become red, flashing madly.

"A leak of cooling agents in the energy storage system has been discovered. Please abort the experiment immediately. I repeat. A—" Another synthesized voice could be heard, *" Launch Control Installation UNTAC is yet to be activated. Please choose whether to activate it or abort the experiment."*
"Railgun firing angle is the sea level + 1. Charge completion is 88%."

Rentaro forcefully breathed hard, trying to cool himself down. There was no way he could allow the launch to terminate. He was not sure of how the leaking of the fluids would affect the launch, but he could tell it was going slowly. He could probably only fire once.

However, he was certain of this,

—If he were to miss, it would be over.

Rentaro prepared himself mentally.

He slowly opened his clenched fist, making sure it was moving.

He pointed the right prosthetic arm, black in color, to the front, imagined his fingers as an arrow, and closed them together.

He searched the inside of the Humerus with his left arm, where the triceps covered, and once he successfully found the button, pushed it down, turned his arm anti-clockwise, and 'removed his arm simply like that'. The joint let out a creak as it was separated, and the area beyond the elbow was detached.

Rentaro stared at the neural connections, the heat insulation materials and the cushions on the severed surface for the time being.

He immediately removed the universal bolt attached to the chamber, located far away from the control panel, placed the removed right arm onto it, and pressed the button to seal it. The right arm was sent to the chamber, locked in place.

"Rentaro, are you?"

"Right, I'm going to use my right arm as a bullet. A Super Varanium should work well."

The computer analysis data was indicated, ostensibly approving Rentaro's ideas. It was shown that this material could withstand 5% of lightspeed at maximum.

"Launch installation still unresponsive. Activating manual trigger control system. Charge is at 100%--ready for launch."

Something akin to a joystick rose from the control panel. It was simply something akin to a pistol grip attached to a stick, but Rentaro grabbed onto it, ostensibly praying.

The indicator continued to flicker, showing the value of 100%. The powerful energy, amounting to billions of Terravolts, gathered upon the muzzle, causing the facility to quiver.

The projectile auto-lock of the firing control installation showed nary a response; in other words, Rentaro had to manually aim at the target.

—That's impossible.

He closed his eyes firmly.

The distance from this facility on the Boso Peninsula to the Tokyo Bay was approximately 50km.

In this world, anyone who could snipe a target more than 1km away would be considered an expert. The target was massive, but how could he expect to hit a target 50km away?

If he were to do it manually—the chances of success would certainly be less than a decimal of a percentage.

The panel showed the trails of fire gathered upon the Scorpion, which was ready to land on the Tokyo Bay. The giant and the JSDF were in a skirmish on the sea.

Despite it being nighttime, he could see the black Monoliths standing wordlessly behind, protecting Tokyo.

The Scorpion suddenly swung its exceptionally long tentacle sickles, levelling the cannons and missiles silos in one fell swoop. Bits of debris and sand were uplifted everywhere, clearly showing the despairing situation.

He recalled the spiteful howl from the Scorpion, and gripped the joystick so hard he was about to break it.

He used his clothes to try and wipe the sweat off his hand on the joystick.

The siren rang shrilly in his ears, indicating the leaking of the cooling agents, frustrating him to no end. It was basically telling him to hurry up.

Rentaro felt himself gasping, his throat akin to a wounded beast, and he gritted his teeth.

Can't let that beast step onto Tokyo Bay. If I give up here, what am I fighting for until today?

Go on! Go on! Rentaro Satomi!

His frozen fingers were unable to move.

He was holding onto that stick, kneeling onto the floor.

"No…I can't do it. I…"

—He wanted to run away.

A pair of small hands suddenly enveloped Rentaro's.

Startled, he looked aside, and found Enju looking like usual, staring at him gently.

"Rentaro, I'm here too."

Rentaro's mouth was wilting, parched. He felt his eyes heat up, lowered his head, and embraced Enju tightly, almost wrecking her.

"We're doomed if this shot misses."

"We'll definitely hit it. You'll definitely make it, Rentaro."

"Stop spouting nonsense! There's no way that can way! Besides, why do they even believe this this weapon that has been sleeping for 10 years here without any test firing? If I make a mistake here, the shot may end up hitting the Tokyo Bay! There'll be an unprecedented disaster on our hands."

"But you'll definitely make it, Rentaro."

"Why're you always saying such irresponsible stuff? I—"

Enju suddenly brought her face to Rentaro's, causing them to nearly crash into each other. She stared at him with her large eyes, and bit her lips tightly.

"I never said anything irresponsible. That's what I always think. Only you can save the world, Rentaro, not anyone else."

Shocked, Rentaro covered his mouth.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and calmed down.

"Enju…I definitely don't want to lose you."

Enju's tensed body relaxed, and she closed her eyes and wrapped her arm around Rentaro's neck, ostensibly feeling utterly relieved.

"…Yes, it's fine. I love you too."

The scorching body temperature nearly scalded him, yet it came with a sense of comfort akin to a feather coat's.

One had to wonder how much time passed before 'umph' Enju suddenly let out a weird sound and brought her face's to Rentaros.

"Rentaro, can I confirm something first? Can this be interpreted as a proposal?"

"Y……You-You idiot! I do like you, in the relative sense! Anyway, a 10-year-old brat shouldn't talk about love! Let alone our feelings, in legal terms—"

For some reason, Enju scowled as she stared intently.

"So you like Kisara, Rentaro?"

"Ack! …Don't say it!"

Enju then showed a V-sign to Rentaro.

“In two years, I’ll definitely make you love me more than Kisara. Two years!”

Rentaro could only smile wryly as he scratched his head.

“You’ll be 12, and I’ll be 18, huh? My age will increase, and that’ll make it more like a crime, no?”

“But I can’t wait any longer than that.”

“Right right, I get it, I get it. Looking forward to it then.”

Enju smiled, and slowly separated herself from him.

“…You’re not scared now, right?”

Rentaro stared at his palm, and felt inexplicably relived. His trembling had stopped, and he closed his eyes.

“Right, thanks for helping me there. I’m going to end this.”

Rentaro lifted his head and stared at the panel. He felt a sense of pity at the rampaging Scorpion.

Sorry to call you for no real reason, but we can’t die yet.

The energy, on the verge of volatility since a while back, was causing tremors in the facility like a quake.

SHOOTING CONTROL DEVICE "UNTAC"

He again held the stick, and Enju placed her hand over his. Both of them place their fingers on the trigger.

Rentaro closed his eyes.

For some inexplicable reason, he felt relieved. He did not feel that he would miss.

“Enju.”

“Yes.”

Both of them slowly squeezed the trigger.

There was indescribable relief as his body was ostensibly lightly, and he lost his sense of time.

Soon, the light engulfed everything like a blessing.

Pretended Nonchalance

If there was a term to describe the Sacred Residence, it would be a magnificent palace.

Rentaro looked around, and saw the majestic pillars standing tall, the arched ceiling and sparkling floor depicting a mosaic.

He scratched his head, adjusting the collar of his white formal suit from time to time.

Why did it end up like this? Rentaro had been questioning himself amidst the cheers in his heart.

"There's a Celebration Ceremony tomorrow. Don't be late" Kisara told Rentaro this the previous day with an impatient look, and tossed the map and suit onto him.

He thought that Kisara would have made preparations, but he ended up riding on the train alone.

He recalled how skeptical he was when he first saw the map, but he was utterly intimidated when he realized it was not a mistake, that the ceremony was located in District 1 of the Tokyo Area—the middle of the Sacred Residence.

The guard saw that he was murmuring to himself, that there was some mistake, and approached him with a suspicious look. Once he saw the invitation however, the guard's face broke into a smile, like it was a spell to open the door, and patted Rentaro on the back as he let the latter pass.

Kisara was wearing a dress as she stood at the gates of the ceremony venue. She had her hands on her hips, looking impatient, and once she saw Rentaro, "You're late!" she said—until now.

"Satomi, you're the guest of honor today. Please don't look around like an old man. I'll be very embarrassed as the president."

"Hey, Miss Kisara, you never said that it was about such an important thing."

"Huh, I didn't say so yesterday? Didn't I say that Lady Seitenshi will personally award the Civil Securities who made remarkable contributions? That you have to be more properly dressed?"

"You never said anything like that! You just dumped the clothes on my impatiently and went off!"

"Is that so? Well, it's fine anyway. Ah, your necktie's crooked, Satomi. I'll straighten it for you, stay still."

The black-laced gloves covered the elbows as her hands reached for Rentaro's chest, causing his heart to race.

—Miss Kisara sure is pretty.

Once his anxiety faded, he had the luxury of seeing Kisara's attire again.

The black dress she was in had black rose-like lace, and at the top of it was a similarly black ribbon.

It seemed she did not notice it as she was embroiled in the battle against the necktie, but

Rentaro, when looking down, was able to see her voluptuous breasts through the sleeveless dress.

Her hair was giving off an alluring aroma.

"H-Hey…you. This really is an amazing angle."

"Don't talk to me now. Seriously, why is a necktie so hard to tie?"

Rentaro's fingers were shaking against his will.

"—Like this?"

Kisara yanked the tie.

"Ack!"

And Rentaro was choked with astounding force.

Kisara closed her eyes as she shook her head.

"I guess not, huh? This really doesn't suit me, I guess. Satomi, you resemble the 'Hangman' in the set of tarot cards I have, that suffering look especially. You have to adjust your own tie."

Perhaps she realized that made a verbal gaffe, as she immediately covered her mouth.

With an obscure look on her face, she looked over at the stump of his right arm, and soon spoke slowly.

"Is your new prosthetic arm done yet?"

"Almost. Just a little longer"

"Speaking of which, I just met with Dr Sumire. She said ‘He probably watched too much Super Robot Anime to think of using a Rocket Punch to beat a Stage V. I thought he was dull, but he’s really an idiot. An idiot. Ahh, how amusing. Ahahahaha’."

"…Why’s it that I’m being treated as an idiot even thought I saved the Tokyo Area?"

"How would I know?"

Kisara drew a pocket watch from her pocket.

"It’s time. You got it? Repeat exactly as what I tell you. This ceremony itself is basically using up Lady Seitenshi’s administrative time, so everyone has a mutual understanding that we have to end it fast. That’s why if she asks anything, answer as briefly as possible, either ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Don’t ask any questions. You understand?"

"‘Yes’."

"Good answer."

Rentaro took a deep breath in front of the gates, and once he made up his mind, pushed the door slightly. It felt icy, but was unexpectedly light, and the beams of light shone from the inside. He turned around, and saw Kisara smiling at him.

"Everything you did from the beginning to the end was nicely done. Really impressive. Continue to battle hard, my Knight."

Rentaro felt something surge in his heart, and was about to say something, only to be at a sudden loss of words. The doors were shut, he looked around, and saw a red carpet on large marble steps, while Seitenshi was sitting comfortably on the throne.

The spacious room had a tall ceiling, and there were gentlemen and ladies of nobility jostling beside the ceremonial guards.

"Welcome, Mr Satomi."

Seitenshi beamed as she descended the stairs.

This was the first time Rentaro met her, but her beauty was much more sublime than it seemed on the monitor. The Empress of the Sacred Residence was famed for her beauty, and she might be the best amongst them. Rentaro felt his back straighten."

"Are you injuries fine now?"

"Oh, it's a lot better thanks to you."

"What is it? Is there any thoughts from the savior of the Tokyo Area?"

A few days passed since that incident. Though there had been a large scale Civil Security Operation, the details were not revealed to the public. The official statement was that a Civil Security member 'just so happened' to be present, and sniped down a Gastrea Scorpion that suddenly attacked the Tokyo Area.

"Yeah. The reactions of the people around me was a little weird, well, awkward for me."

"I guessed so. Well, this is to be expected after all. It was scary just to recall that scene."

The blitz bullet the Rentaro pair shot blew a large hole in the Scorpion's head, and caused its brains to spill out.

The Varanium managed to successfully obstruct the regenerative effects, and the Scorpion should have died immediately. However, the Scorpion flipped its body at Rentaro's direction before it died, probably due to some abnormal power.

Its black eyelids were half closed as they quivered, ostensibly wanting to say something to him before closing. The Scorpion fell sideways onto the sea, causing a large tsunami to surge upon the Tokyo Bay.

"I will feel very honored to have someone like you present, Mr Satomi. You will continue to do your best for the Tokyo Area, no?"

Rentaro did as what he was commanded to do,

"Yes, even if I'll have to sacrifice my life."

Seitenshi raised her hands up high, and solemnly announced,

"Has everyone present heard this? This hero here has sworn to fight for the Tokyo Area—he destroyed the Zodiac 'Scorpion', and defeated the original IP ranked 134 pair of Kagetane Hiruko and Kohina Hiruko. Because of this, The IISO and I have negotiated and concluded that this accomplishment is 'Special 1st class achievement', and we have decided to increase the Rentaro Satomi/Enju Aihara pair into the 1000s."

The audience was bubbling with elation, and Seitenshi turned to Rentaro, showing a smile.

"Rentaro Satomi. Do you accept this decision?"

"Yes, I'm honored."

Seitenshi then gave a cheeky chuckle, and whispered,

"The Satomi/Aihara pairing was originally ranked 123,452, so this certainly is an outstanding increase in ranking. This might be the first time in history, probably will be recorded amongst the Guinness World Records."

"Ye-Yes."

"Is there anything you wish to say?"

"No, nothing."—things would probably have ended successfully if he were to say so. He apologized quietly to Kisara as he lifted his head.

"There is."

Rentaro sensed that the atmosphere tense up immediately as Seitenshi widened her eyes in shock.

"Please let me hear it."

"I saw what was inside the box."

Seitenshi widened her eyes, and the crowd was buzzing, not understanding what the topic was about.

Rentaro knelt down, and continued.

"I know this isn't right, but right after we destroyed the Gastrea Scorpion, right before the moment the missile burned the church to crisp, I opened the case and saw what was inside. Inside it was—"

Rentaro hesitated for an instant,

"……Inside it was a damaged tricycle—what's going on? Why's that a catalyst that can summon a Stage 5 Gastrea? No, generally, the Gastrea's a biological enemy that suddenly appeared on Earth 10 years ago, but what is it!? What happened to this world 10 years ago!? Tell me, Lady Seitenshi."

The buzzing had filled the location, and it was beyond control.

Seitenshi stoically answered in a voice only Rentaro could hear,

"The Inheritance of Seven Stars are items located outside the Tokyo Area, in the unventure regions. One of the items were taken this time, and we originally could not predict what sort of devastation would occur. All I can tell you is that the Zodiac came to take that."

"You can only tell me that…"

Seitenshi closed her eyes for quite a while, and then opened them slightly as she sighted.

"Those girls, the Initiators, are possibilities. You know that as your ranking goes up, the civil security pairings will gain all sorts of benefits. This is the same for any kind of rankings; I suppose the accessibility to any classified information certainly is attractive. Your current ranking is around 1000, so your access level is 3. As long as you overtake more rivals and get your ranking into the top 10, you shall be granted the highest access level of 12. Please continue to fight for this authority, Mr Satomi, defeat the current existing 8 Zodiacs out of the original 11, excluding Cancer, and rise up the rankings along with Enju Aihara. At that moment, you shall understand who you are, and what mission you were tasked to complete since birth. Since you are the son of Nakaharu Satomi and Mafuyu Satomi, you have a duty to know the truth."

Rentaro stood up as if he was jolted, and brought himself to Seitenshi.

"What's going on? Why did you mention dad and mom's names?"

There was a long pause, and she did not answer. Rentaro was seething, and was about to grab Seitenshi by the collar, only for her icy stare to stop him.

"Please stop. You will be convicted for Lèse-majesté if you were to do anything to me in such a place."

At this moment, Rentaro felt an icy killing intent fill the room, and cold sweat trekked down his face.

He did not know where it came from, but it was neither an exaggeration nor a joke to say that there was someone who could instantly decapitate his head.

He gritted his teeth, and put down his trembling fists.

"…Please excuse me."

He eked out these words, pushed the door aside as if he slammed his body onto it, and left without looking back.

Rentaro arrived at the Tendo residence.

The Tendo Main House was a top-class residence in Tokyo Area 1, and this Western-styled building was more akin to a country house than a mansion. Rentaro was adopted here when he was young, and grew up in this house. Currently, he was living in an 8-tatami apartment with Enju, whereas Kisara left the house to live alone. It had been a while since he last visited the house like this.

Due to a lack of land space, the people in the country were grumbling, and it seemed the existence of this residence itself, with a 100m distance from the main gate to the house entrance, was a gripe amongst the people. The trees and shrubs were pruned neatly thanks to the gardeners, forming a perfect symmetry. The fountain had a statue of an angel bathing, and was inlayed with shells everywhere.

Rentaro entered using the spare key, went up to the second level, and went straight for the room he was looking for.

He brushed by the elderly housekeeper on the corridor, and once she saw Rentaro, "…Is that you, Young Master?" she said, and dropped the ribbon in her hand. Rentaro really wanted to reminiscence the past with her, but that person would return if he did not hurry. He lowered his head, pretending not to recognize her, and hurried off.

He soon arrived at the room he was looking for, drew his XD handgun, equipped the silencer on through skilful use of his teeth and knee, and fired at the door, shooting the hinges off. He lamented that it was quite inconvenient without his prosthetic as he removed the silencer, picked up the depleted bullets, and broke in.

It was spacious inside, and there was a warm carpet and a bookshelf covering half the wall. In the middle was a large rosewood desk.

Let's hurry up and get this done. With this in mind, Rentaro started to open the drawers and check through them.

At that moment, his cellphone vibrated. It was an anonymous number.

Damn, at such a time. Rentaro hesitated for a little while, and then brought the receiver to his ear.

"Why, Young Satomi, hello there."

Rentaro felt a chill. He grabbed his pounding heart, and took a long exhale.

"…You're still alive, Kagetane?"

His leg felt itchy as the feeling of kicking Kagetane Hiruko back then awoke in him.

After that battle, Kohina stood up with a lifeless expression as she passed by Rentaro and went off to save Kagetane.

Back then, Rentaro had careless assumed that he would be dead after sustaining that many injuries.

"Yep, somehow. Well, your attack was very successful. They shut me down for the time being to recuperate; it is kind of boring to be unable to work for the time being."

"Killing work? Use this chance to stop."

"Well, that is how it looks on the surface. We shall soon meet again. I am calling you today just to say hello; I will not lose to you again the next time we meet."

"…Yeah right. I won't lose either."

In fact, that was a hard fought victory ended after countless unexpected plannings.

He was skeptical as to whether he would be able to beat the Kagetane pair head on if they were fully prepared.

"Also, I suppose it is time to introduce my client to you, Young Satomi."

Damn, is it what it's about? He could hear the sound of a pistol hammer clicking, and in response, threw the cellphone aside, drew the XD handgun without looking back, and aimed at the source.

He slowly got up and prepared himself mentally as he turned back.

A twin barreled Magnum pistol was pointed at Rentaro's nostrils, and the latter's handgun was pointed at an unescapable area, his finger on the trigger.

"So you started sneaking around like a thief, Rentaro?"

"You came back? I thought you'll be back late at night, Your Excellency Tendo."

The 1.8m tall muscular frame was dressed in Hakama. His back was straightened, and though his beard and hair were white, the congenital sharp glare he passed on to Kisara was the real deal.

"What're you doing here?"

"I'm looking for anything that can be used as evidence. Well, I guess it's best to ask the person himself. Kikunojyo Tendo—this incident may have ended with Defense Minister Kutsuwada acting out of line, but I don't think this is the case. The mastermind behind all this happenings is you."

Kikunojyo did not bat an eye, but Rentaro's pulse raced as he felt Kikunojyo's finger exert a little more force on the trigger.

Both of them had their guns pointed at each other, with their interlocked arms in the middle, they circled each other. A bad dance unfolded on the carpet, and it would have suffocated anyone.

"Did Kisara send you here?"

"I came here on my own will."

Kikunojyo then sneered, seemingly mocking him,

"Humph. Why do you find me suspicious?"

Rentaro panicked,

"Ugh, you…don't deny it?"

Kikunojyo then did a mocking shrug,

"Would you have believed if I denied it?"

"No…"

But I hoped you would. He was about to say that, but kept quiet as he lifted his head,

"Minister Kutsuwada's dead. He hung himself during probation!"

"I know that of course. So what?"

"So what, you say? I saw that circle agreement. Those guys who signed on it were all arrested…but the real mastermind didn't write his name on it. I was shocked when I saw the names; they were either your associates, or those who worked under you, no? I remember greeting with them during dinner parties in this residence when I was young. What's going on, you say!?"

"Looks like a smart kid. As expected of Teacher Tendo's adopted son" "Rentaro will definitely make an outstanding politician." Rentaro inadvertently teared up as he recalled these words.

His hand, now holding the gun, was trembling in rage, and he nearly squeezed the trigger.

"They're all good guys back then. Everyone respected you…how do you expect me not to believe that you didn't take part in this plan when you're their leader? Mr Kutsuwada hung himself to prevent matters from being pursued till you. Once he died, everyone treated him as the scapegoat, like it was premeditated before. I don't really care about your issues too much, bu…but don't you feel shame in acting like this after all they did for you, Kikunojyo Tendo!?"

Rentaro huffed and puffed as he said all that. However, Kikunojyo merely raised an eyebrow self-depreciatingly.

"You ask me what I have to do this? Based on what you say, my aim's to destroy the Tokyo Area? What a joke."

"I didn't understand at first. However, when Kagetane stole the case to summon the Stage 5 Gastrea, and escaped into the unventured areas, this information was nearly revealed in an organized manner. If the situation did end up like that, the Tokyo Area would be caught in destructive panic, and nobody should be able to benefit."

"You mean you found an answer?"

"The 'New Gastrea Law'."

Kikunojyo's eyebrow twitched a little.

"It's the new law Lady Seitenshi has been pushing for against the public's protests. It is a law to improve the social status of the Initiators, 'Cursed Children', and allow them to coexist with humanity. You had been a staunch proponent of initiator discrimination ever since the Gastrea killed your wife 10 years ago. I don't know what deal you had with Kagetane, and I don't want to imagine, but both of you had the same ideas, that it's a humiliation for humans and initiators to live together. Kagetane believed in Gastrea supremacy, and you hoped to kill off that law. Once news break out that Kagetane and Kohina Hiruko—'a cursed child' herself, are terrorists attempting to destroy the Tokyo Area, the public would never support the 'cursed children'. You never intended to destroy the Tokyo Area, you despicable cad."

Rentaro's gut was kicked without any forewarning, and he felt the contents of his stomach nearly vomited out.

A gun was pointed at his neck, and he was lashed towards the bookshelf. Once his back hit it, the hardcover books dropped onto the floor.

Kikunojyo was utterly livid as he pointed the gun on Rentaro.

"I dare you to say that again!"

"I'll say it as many times as I want! This is what happened. You let one of your subordinates head into the unventured areas to get back one of the 'Inheritance of 7 Stares' items Seitenshi said it, a catalyst that cane summon a Stage 5. Once he got it, you just had to hand the case over to Kagetane for everything to succeed. But when that subordinate was returning, he was attacked by a Gastrea, and had fluids injected into him. He finally managed to escape within the Monoliths, but was unexpected turned into a Gastrea himself. He became a

Spider-type, and infected someone else. The proof behind this is that one of the men on the circle agreement is still missing, so the Gastrea source Enju and I beat back then must be him. Kagetane finally managed to get the case back, but this information was sealed at the last moment before Lady Seitenshi could reveal the information. You wanted to kill off the new Gastrea Law, let people recall the terror of the Gastrea back then, and for those purposes, allowed them to summon a Stage 5. You clearly knew that the Tokyo Area would have been demolished!"

"THAT'S RIGHT!"

Kikunojyo was ostensibly ablaze as he bellowed,

"This is to reawaken those guys who're overly used to the peaceful lives. Why can they forget? Why? That day 10 years ago. The sun fell, the earth cracked, and humanity was about to be purged from this world! The gluttonous bugs with that parasitic blood are roaming around our streets leisurely! Those red eyes are demons wanting to level this world! Why is everyone able to remain so calm!? Grant them equal human rights!?What a joke!"

At that instant, Rentaro seized the opportunity to smack the gun aside.The gunshot grazed past Rentaro's cheek, and the latter tripped Kikunojyo with a sweeping kick, and hit the gap between the ribs with the knee. Kikunojyo was left moaning in pain along with the crash.

"Everything's correct! Your wife may have been killed by them, but Miss Kisara's parents were killed too! The doctor lost her lover! Everyone made peace with the past and continued living! You're just a spirit living in the past, Kikunojyo Tendo! A spirit unwilling to let go of your hatred since 10 years ago! You intend to take action before Lady Seitenshi while being her assistant! Do you hate her!@

Rentaro coughed as he continued.

"Don't be foolish. I really respect her. Amongst all the Seitenshis in history, she's the one who really lives up to her title! She's the queen I really want to serve!"

"Then--"

"Because of this, some things can't be forgiven!"

Rentaro pointed his XD at Kikunojyo's forehead as he stared into the latter's burning eyes.. There was no sign of pretense to be seen.While this man was

sincerely loyal to Seitenshi, his hatred of the Gastrea was as strong, to a point of madness.

"...I guess Miss Kisara must have known the truth."

"I guess so too. But you don't have any proof.You can't do anything to me."

Rentaro stared into Kikunojyo's eyes for quite a while.

Soon after, he moved his leg aside, placed his XD back into the holster, and turned away.

"...What do you plan to do? You'll regret it if you don't kill me now."

"I'm regretting it already. You're Miss Kisara's biggest enemy."

"Then what exactly are you thinking, Rentaro?"

"What?"

Rentaro turned back, only to see Kikunojyo's wrinkled face frown, showing an utterly devastated look.

"What are you thinking, Rentaro? Didn't your arm and leg get eaten up by them? DIdn't they take Nakaharu and Mafuyu away from you? Why're you able to forgive them? Don't you hate them?"

"Of course I do! My anger won*t be appeased even if I shed them to pieces! I once thought of destroying all the Gastrea and the 'Cursed Children' through my own hands!"*

"Then why exactly!?"

"Have you interacted with them? Just one of them? They'll cry for the most trivial stuff, laugh, pout, fawn, they're gentleness, full of human warmth! You call them bugs? They're humans! I--Rentaro Satomi, believe in Enju Aihara!"

"Rentaro…you."

Rentaro slowly closed his eyes.

"You saved me once. Those words you said to me *"If you don't want to die, live on, Rentaro!"* This clear yet powerful line is just like you; whenever I close my eyes in despiar, I remember these words and overcome the difficulties in front

of me--I never forgot what happened that day 10 years ago. Thanks...and farewell, my stepfather."

Rentaro left the residence.

"Hey, Rentaro! I! am! here!"

Enju, dressed in a thin hospital garb, was jumping away as her shout echoed throughout the hospital building.

This shout caused an old granny to injure her waist, a 3-year-old girl to wet herself, and an old man's false teeth and wig to jump.

"A-at least be quiet when you're in the hospital,you idiot. Besides, you don have anything called manners in your dictionary…"

Before Rentaro could finish, Enju pressed her face into his chest

"Rentaro Rentaro Rentaro there's big news! They gave me a body inspection during the checkup, and found that my breasts have grown a little! Are you happy, Rentaro?"

Enju lifted her chest proudly, but once Rentaro saw her burdock like figure, *"Eh? Where?"* he nearly let out these words,

"It's about time for me to wear a bra now, right?"

"Y-Yeah, maybe about 5 years later."

Rentaro nonchalently said such cruel words.

"What about that ceremony? Were we praised? Did they cheer for us and say that we're amazing? My body checkup was so boring! I wanted to see too! Oh, you look cool dressed in a suit, Rentaro!"

Enju's eyes dazzled as she fired questions at Rentaro.

"How's the checkup, Enju?!

Enju blinked, and then gave a V-sign, ostensibly saying that it was a good question.

"24.9%.Doesn't look like there's anything changes at all."

Rentaro barely managed to swallow the groan he nearly let slip.

"Is-Is that so…"

"I'm gonna get changed, Rentaro!"

Rentaro lifted his head, and witnessed a rare sight of Sumire Muroto appearing outside the underground room she usually stayed in, waving at him.

"I'm going to hear a long sermon from the doctor."

"Then let's go meet up at the park in front of the hospital later."

Rentaro watched Enju sprint down the corridor once she said this, and then went into the room Sumire was in.

There was nothing blocking the sun in front of the park, and the weather was comfy for an April day.

One would have assumed it was past the season of viewing cherry blossoms, but they were blooming with their last ounce of energy. Whenever the wind blew, the petals would fall gently. Rentaro and Enju were strolling down this path as the odor of sprouting greenery filled their nostrils.

"Ho ho, have our IP ranking risen that much?"

"Yeah. I heard it's unprecedented. They'll formally notify us next week."

Enju immediately spotted an ice cream shop in a corner of the park, and shouted at Rentaro,

"Can I buy some, Rentaro?"

Thinking that it could be very expensive, Rentaro opened his wallet, "Ack." and inadvertently groaned.

He thought that even though his ranking had increased, his finances were still dire, and sighed.

He took out a note with trembling hands, and placed it firmly in Enju's hands.

"This is our allowance for the month.Spend wisely."

"Got it. That means I can buy as many ice creams as I want, right?"

"Why're you thinking that way!! Hey, wait! Enju!"

Enju could no longer hear Rentaro's hollers, and the latter stared at her as she darted off in an instant, brooding within.

He inadvertently chuckled.

He was still alive, his stomach still grumbling. It was such a wonderful thing.

Enju would not know, the fact being that another person did an admirable sacrifice for the peace of the Tokyo Area.

After the railgun module cannon was activated, Rentaro laid Enju carefully on the floor as her utterly fatigued body slumbered like a log, and quietly walked out of the facility.

Back then, he looked up at the sky, and the night was about to become dawn.

His breaths were white, probably due to the rising tide, and he rubbed his hands together as he descended from the steep rock. After some distance, he looked up at the 'Ladder of Heaven', and could clearly seen the acceleration rail collapse after firing the flying object. It seemed the rail was not strong enough to withstand the tremendous acceleration of the bullet.

He walked on as he thought about something he tried to refrain from thinking of up till that point.

Gastrea beings were very sensitive to loud booms, and some objects could possibly gather after hearing a noise from several kilometers away.

The astounding booms should have shook the entire unventured are during the deathmatch against Kagetane, and when the railgun cannon was activated.

However, it seemed,from the outcome, that the battle was not affected, and the railgun was fired successfully.

Clearly, this was unnatural.

Someone certainly managed to withstand the incoming swarms of Gastreas, surging like a tsunami.

The scent of blood got thicker.

Rentaro got behind the rock, and held his breath.

There was a large Gastrea carcass. This individual being, ostensibly several times larger than a Komodo Dragon, had lost its fore limbs, and its lower chin was blown off.

It was not the only carcass present.

There were insect Gastreas, Gastreas shrouded in vines, serpents, toads,and other forms that were mutated from some unknown beings. There were beings of all shapes sizes, from Stage 1 to 4.

The common theme amongst them was that their lives were terminated.

Rentaro wandered around the carcasses.

Soon after, he found a human foot with a shoe on, lying carelessly on the ground.

There was an empty magazine lying nearby, and Rentaro soon chanced upon the remains of a full-automatic shotgun severed in two from the stock onwards.

Rentaro tried his best to hold in the whimpers as he continued walking through the carcasses.

In this shrill silence, the only thing to be heard were his shoes trudging through the sand.

And then, he found it. He found her.

He slowly shook his head, his voice nearly breaking as he clenched his fists.

"Why...why didn't you run away? Didn't you say that you'll run if you're in trouble?"

Kayo Senju had her back leaning on a rock as she stared at Rentaro with hollow eyes.

"Because...I couldn't do that."

She lost her left arm and right leg. Her white one-piece skirt was stained with blood, and there were bite marks everywhere.

Her wounds were regenerating fast, alarmingly fast. Even her ripped arm and leg were regenerating.

--But this was not something to be delighted about at all.

"Mr Satomi...I…"

Rentaro clutched at his heart that almost popped out, and said to her,

"The corrosion within you is probably over 50%."

The 'Cursed Children' typically use drugs over and over again to inhibit the corrosion of the Gastrea virus within them, but those were simply 'suppressants', and not inhibitied it completely. Due to the inhibitory factor within them, they would not be turned into Gastrea immediately like ordinary people, but sudden use of their powers or introduction of Gastrea fluids in their bodies would cause the corrosion rate to increase slightly.

Like ordinary people, once the corrosion rate was beyond 50%, they would be completely corrupted, and would no longer remain human.

This limit was something that could not be delayed nor limited by the current standards of medicine.

Rentaro drew the XD handgun to count the remaining number of bullets. There was still one last Varanium bullet inside the chamber.

He put the silencer on, and wordlessly aimed right in the middle of her forehead.

He knew what he had to do.

Kayo Senju could no longer be saved. She had to die here.

"Mr Satomi. Where's Mr Syogen?"

"...He's fine."

Their eyes met, and she closed her eyes slowly, ostensibly feeling relived.

"Please, Mr Satomi. Allow me to die as a human."

Rentaro's exhale was quivering, not because of the cold.

His muzzle was swinging about, and he could not stablize his reticule. It was up close, but there was still a chance that he could miss. It was laughable.

He suddenly felt the preciousness of the time they spent chatting by the fire, and a feeling of affection rose within him, ready to scratch through his chest.

Damn it! Damn it!

"...Please, Mr Rentaro. Don't cry."

Rentaro gritted his teeth so hard his laniarys were almost shattered. He forced a smile.

"I'm fine. Im not crying. This isn't my first time."

"...You affirmed my existence, and I don't want you to die. That's why I did my best. It was tough, but it's great that I managed to remain alive. My chest is full of thanks. Thank you, Mr Satomi."

Retaro shook his head wordlessly.

Kayo continued,

"...Hey, you don't really have any friends, do you, Mr Satomi?"

"Eh?"

"...I guess there's no choice. I shall be your friend."

Both their stares intertwined for a while.

"...Well, I'm worried about a lack of friends. Thanks."

The trembling hand stopped, and his heart had calmed down.

"--You're my precious friend. I won't forget you."

Rentaro raised his gun and aimed it at the middle her forehead.

Her eyes had lots all luster.

And her voice was in stutters.

"...Mr Satomi, I guess that in the future...there shallbe a lot of trials awaiting you. When you lose your way, amidst the darkness, please follow the compass in your heart...to where...where the light is...Mr Sat...save...this world……"

Rentaro squeezed the trigger, and the recoil from the 40 cal jolted his arm. A dull shot rang, and an empty round was ejected. The slide stopping mechanism jolted, locking it.

Her anomaly had stopped.

His nose was aching, perhaps because of the gunpowder he breathed in.

Once he heard the rotors of the helicopter, he turned around, and saw the dawn shine in from the distant hills.

Her battle had ended. Another person, another initiator had died in battle silently.

Enju was still choosing the ice cream enthusiastically.

Rentaro lifted his head, and slowly raised his hand to block the sunlight, narrowing his eyes as he stared at the dazzling sunlight, pondering.

--What exactly are humans?

They can talk, they walk on two feet, they wear clothes.

However, these alone could not prove their humanity.

And the number of genes humans pass down was at most twice that of a fly.

--In that case, what were the 'Cursed Children'.

Sumire Muroto said that they were 'the ambassadors between humanity and Gastrea, representatives of God'.

Seitenshi said 'those girls are possibilities'.

Kikunojyo Tendo once said, 'they're demons wanting to level this world'.

Humanity had once boasted its invinciblity on Earth, and enjoyed a period of pinnacle. However, it ended with the appearance of the Gastrea.

About 90% of humanity managed to survive, and this could be said to be the End Times, the difference makers being the potential initiators.

Due to the corrosion of the genetics, they could be seemed as non-relatives even after a DNA test, and the number of abandoned children was on the rise.

They were thrown into the darkness before their eyes were born, cuddled together in a corner of the Tokyo Area, simply hoping to be loved.

There was an endless discrimination on them, a hatred that could not be quelled. Was their existence simply about evolving humanity to the next level?

Rentaro closed his eyes slowly.

Enju Aihara once said, "I'm human!"

I believe Enju.

They were the ones who broke the husk of humanity, 'New Humans' that overlook the world from high up, and gave humanity a new perspective after the latter fought each other till self-destruction over the barriers of race, religion and language.

Kikunojyo scrtached himself, spewed words of doom, and cursed everything in the world. He was probably an example of what Rentaro would have become if he never met Enju.

Like how Kisara could not live on if she did not accept her dialysis--

Like how Enju Aihara could not live on if she did not continue taking the inhibiting drugs--

--Once Rentaro Satomi loses Enju Aihara's smile, he would definitely be unable to live.

Their existences were definitely not of bugs.

"Are you feeling sick, Rentaro?"

Rentaro recovered, and found Enju staring at him with a large pile of ice cream in both hands.

"I-I'm not! You see, I'm actually jumping with joy now that our ranking's at an amazing level now. Hahahaha."

Enju saw Rentaro run to a nearby bench, jumping and flailing about strangely on it, and was startled for a little while, but immediately grinned.

"You're weird, Rentaro."

At that moment, a metallic object landed on the stone pavement, causing them to freeze.

Startled, Rentaro stared at his left wrist, then at the floor over and over again.What landed on the floor was a fragment of a bracelet. There was a layer of chrome-silver plating on the cariving itself.

Oh yeah, this is what Enju bought for me. Seems like it's an anime toy--

"What is this?"

"The bracelet the tenchu girls wear. This is the proof to identify the 47 warriors, and if there is anyone lying to their allies, this bracelet will show cracks, and reveal who is not being honest amongst them."

Rentaro let out a trembling sigh as he stared at the bracelet fragment.

Enju Aihara's Diagnosis Record

Supervising Doctor: Sumire Muroto

-Enju Aihara, Gastrea Virus Corrosion rate,42.8%

-Estimated percentage until complete collapse, 7.2%.

-Doctor's comment--critical region. Told the patient a lower value to avoid shock. Regulations decree that in such situations, the Promoter is to be notified instead.

The following advice is not made as a doctor, but as a friend.

Do not allow her to continue fighting, Rentaro.

Author's Notes

It's nice to meet you for the first time.This is Shiden Kanzaki. To explain matters to the those who read from the afterword, this book is an action story of a guardian-like high school male protagonist and a 10-year-old loli girl pair. As mentioned in the Shogakukan, when authors are at my level, there will be no end to publishing requests--well, this definitely isn't possible. I had the original manuscript in my hands, begging 'Please publish this, please publish this', showing a kitten-like cuteness as I rolled on the floor in the Dengeki Bunko editorial department, grabbing Mr Kurosaki's leg in a firm hold when he approached after being fooled. After all that, this work finally exists.

-Regarding the title.

I did not think too much into it; I simply lumped my favorite color together with my favorite movie title, so I got 'Black Memento'.The in-charge was already unhappy with this right from the beginning, and as an author, I was used to being called in, so I went through a battle of endurance, got them to publish under this name, and did an unexpected direct attack on them through the phone in the middle of the night. "This title doesn't sound good" When this Kanzaki realized this, he immediately changed for the better and changed it to the current title.

-Regarding the twin handguns

A certain person has twin handguns in this work, and the concept is being 'the weakest two handguns in history'.

To those currently browsing through and reading the afterword, please think of it as yourself being fooled and read the main work again. After that, you'll definitely realize that you're fooled.

This work is meant to a form of entertainment involving lolicon heaven, breasts festivals, perverted gunfighting and nonsensical boxing. I sincerely hope you will not be reading through this again.

And finally, for something a little more serious.

I will really like to thank and apologize to the editor-in-charge Mr Kurosaki is the nice guy who gave me this chance, Saki Ukai, who graced this book with

such beautiful illustrations, the editor chief who personally talked to me whenever certain problems popped up, and to all the others who took part in the publishing of this book.

And finally, I will like to thank the readers who took their precious time to read this afterword.

I am really grateful, and it is my utmost pleasure to meet you.

I feel blissful to meet you through this book you're reading through

And I hope all the readers who read my book will be graced by God.

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